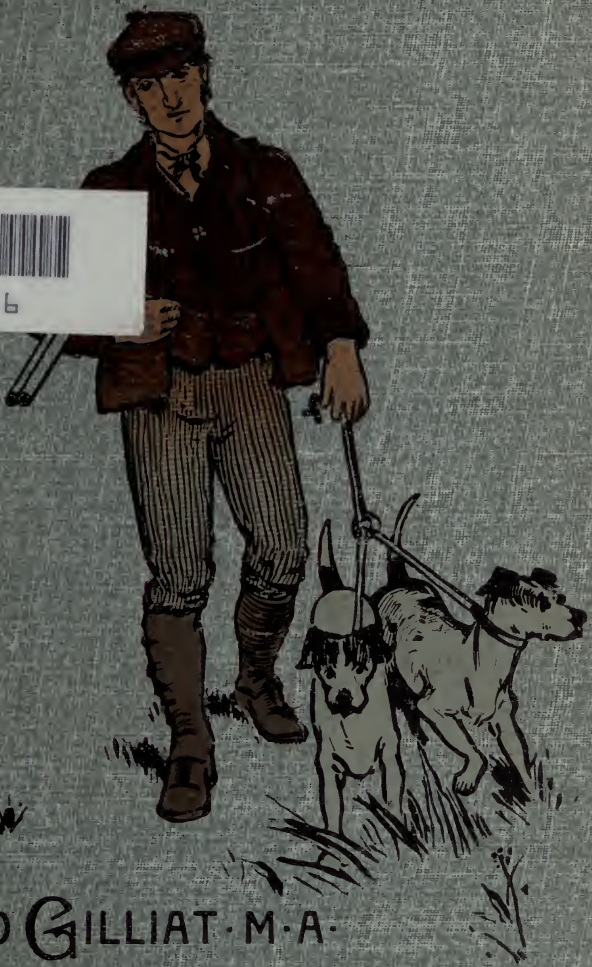
Velveteens.



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Harrow April 1894

Frontispiece. "DEAD? WHO'S DEAD?" ASKED THE SQUIRE. *Page* 33.

VELVETEENS.

A NORFOLK STORY.

BY

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VELVETEENS.

CHAPTER I.

THE KEEPER'S LODGE.

MR. FORBES, head gamekeeper to the Squire of Beckthorp, was just sitting down to his tea in his cosy little lodge by the side of the home wood. It was six o'clock on the evening of the last day in August. The day had been a busy one for Mr. Forbes and his stalwart son, the latter of whom is just giving a finishing touch to his wet hair yonder, as you can see if you peep through the half-open door; while the only daughter, Jean, is serving up hot a rasher of bacon and fried potatoes, which splutters and crackles merrily as she lifts it from the fire.

"Steady, lass, steady," murmurs Mr. Forbes, in a deep bass, as he scrutinizes the appetizing dish, and fears to lose a drop of the fat.

Mr. Forbes had been fetchéd by the Squire, twenty years back, out of Ayrshire, and he had ever a low-land Scot's eye for thrift. He had been a widower

seven years next Christmas, and Jeannie, now twenty years old, had kept house for him like a good lassie as she was.

"Now, Angus, tea's ready," she cried to her brother, and set to with a will to pour out the tea, while her father picked out for himself the choicest morsels of 'streaky.'"

Poor Mr. Forbes! you must not deem him selfish for thinking of himself first; he had been out all day and had eaten nothing since breakfast time: for to-morrow was the beginning of partridge-shooting, and there were gentlemen staying at the hall, friends of Master Aubrey, the Squire's eldest son, who were expecting a good day. The keeper's hair is touched with grey, but his ruddy face and strong frame seem to betoken many years before him. Angus, not quite so tall as his father, is strongly knit; like his sister, his hair is fair and skin white, where the sun and wind have not browned it to mahogany. They sit and talk not; Jean knows it is useless speaking just yet, while her father and brother are so absorbed in the business of the evening. She finds it lonely, at times, living in the keeper's lodge, away from the village and the pleasant give-and-take of village talk; though she does sometimes lock up the house, and trip down the hill to the village shop and post-office. Just now, not being so hungry as the others, she lifts her blue eyes dreamily to the big rafter of oak which crosses the ceiling, from which hangs her father's double-barrelled gun, the trigger-guard of which shines like silver in the firelight; there, too, is fastened up the old copper powder-flask, curiously cased, which he had brought with him out of Ayrshire in the days when breech-loaders were in their infancy. Then she gets up and gives the logs on the hearth a stir with her shapely foot, making fireworks blaze up the wide chimney, and

calling from the turpentine of the pine an aromatic odour which pervades the little room.

"There!" says Mr. Forbes, sitting back in his chair, and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, "I think you managed that rasher as well as your poor mother ever could ha' done it, Jeannie."

Jean smiled across the table, and held out her hand for her father's cup, saying, "It's a hard life you have, father, out in the woods and among the turnips all weathers: I'm sure you and Angus deserve something nice when you come home. But where's Willie? He's very late to-night; he didn't ought to be so late as this."

"We left him with Jim, the watcher," said Angus, stopping in his drink; "the youngster was helping to chop some light timber."

"Ha! that reminds me," said Mr. Forbes, meditating with his head leaning on his hand, as he looked sideways into the hissing fire, "I ha' dreamed thrice o' losing teeth lately; there's some bad news brewing, I doubt it. A body never dreams o' teeth but there's a death coming in the family."

"Oh, father, don't be so fearsome," said Jean, trying to laugh the omen away.

"I hope that boy hasn't gone and cut hisself in two with a hatchet, Angus; did you warn him now? There's only two on you, and we can't be too careful of one another."

This was Mr. Forbes's Scotch way of showing affection; he went on in his most lugubrious voice—

"Mind, childer, if aught happens any day to me, there's two hundred pounds saved up in yonder bank; and I shouldn't wonder if the old Squire would clap Angus i' my place."

"Come, father," said Angus, patting the gamekeeper gently on the shoulder, "don't you give way to the megrims this how. Willie is all right.

I'll be bound; and you don't look like dying this thirty year. You must ha' eaten your bacon too fast and got a touch o' indigestion; that's what it is, most like."

At this moment the door was flung open, and a yellow-haired boy of twelve rushed in, crying, "What do you think?"

"Think? why, shut that door," said his father, gruffly. Now that Willie had come back all safe, the gamekeeper began to be ashamed of his late forebodings; and, being ashamed, he was disposed to be angry with somebody. Therefore, Willie, being the youngest, was a very convenient valve for explosion.

"What *do* you think?" began Willie again, with all the glee that small boys feel when they find themselves possessed of some news which has not yet been vouchsafed to their elders.

"Well, I think you'll ha' to go supperless to bed —that's what I think."

The boy pouted; he did so want to deliver his message, and he could get no fair hearing for it. At last, in a pet, he bawled out, "I thought you was the Squire's gamekeeper, and cared about yer game, but I finds yer doesn't, so it's no matter."

"What is it, Willie?" said Angus, putting a hand on each cheek, and lifting the boy's face. "You needn't be rude to your father, you know; but what is the matter?"

"Oh nothing, if father doesn't care about hearing," said Willie.

It was very clear that Willie was a spoilt boy; being so much younger than the others, he had been treated by the rest like a pet lamb; and, like a pet lamb, he was apt to be skittish and petulant. Mr. Forbes put down his pipe, which he had been beginning to fill, and, drawing the boy to him, said—

"Now, be douce, laddie, and tell us what you've got to tell us. Have you put up any more partridges down yonder?"

Willie began again to feel himself growing important; he had secured a splendid audience; he could afford to smile now.

"What do you think, father? Jim says he thinks they poachers is netting t'other side o' Firlebv wood."

Mr. Forbes clapped both hands on the table, and half rose.

"Did Jim bid you run home and tell your father?"

"Yes, that he did; says he, 'Be sure you axe him to get some men to come along wi' him; for they's be a posse of 'em.'"

"Angus, lad, get thee a good ash stick; I'll take a rook rifle in case——"

"Oh, father, be careful," cried Jean, with a quivering lip as she buttoned his coat for him; then the two men went out.

The door was unsnecked again, and Mr. Forbes reappeared—

"Good night, bairns; if I don't come home timely, good night."

He had kissed them both, Jeannie and Willie, and had again gone forth into the darkness.

Jean did not at once clear the things away, but sat looking into the fire at the charred bough, the spluttering root, the white bed of charcoal; but she saw nothing in the fire but her own presentiments. Strange! that talking of teeth, and death, and money saved, and "taking my place;" and then that coming back to bid them good night, and kissing them both: it was not his wont to kiss them on week days. On Sundays he would take Jean on his knee and tease her about her young man, who

had gone to London to better himself, and end up by kissing her because she was so like her poor mother. But to come back just for that seemed so strange. Surely he had had a call, and knew it. Jean's mind was infected with much of the Scotch superstition which clung about her father, and the more she brooded over it, the more she conjured up terrible scenes of bloodshed, till at last Willie looked up from his supper, and said—

"Why don't you talk, Jean?"

"Oh, I'm frightened to death of those poachers, Willie!"

"Bosh! I'm not; when I've had my supper I shall go out and look for them. I say, Jean, suppose Angus got hit on the head and was carried in looking like dead! Should you like that?"

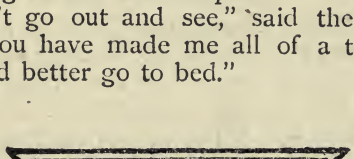
No reply; the boy went on—

"Suppose father and Angus were both killed, and only you and I were left, how would you like *that?*"

"Hush! was that a noise outside?"

They both listened long and breathlessly; the wind had arisen, and some branches were scraping and tapping on the window-pane.

"I shan't go out and see," said the boy, doggedly; "you have made me all of a tremble. I think I had better go to bed."



CHAPTER II.

THE POACHERS.

THE keeper and his son hurried over the little strip of garden, and crossed the streamlet that was bickering to the sea. The dogs heard them as they slept in their kennels, and clamoured for permission to accompany them. The ferrets scampered about in their hutches, for they, too, smelt the keeper's pockets.

"Shall we take the mastiff, father?"

"Na, na; let her bide yonder. She shall fright the game. Well, I dunno, though; she might help us to find the rascals. Yes, lad, go and let her out, but keep fast hold of her; pass a thong through her collar."

"All right, father; I'll catch you as you go down the lane."

The keeper trudged on, bending forward a little as he walked, and inwardly grudging that these lazy loons, who did no work all day, should be spoiling thus ruthlessly his own work of so many months. Presently he lifted the latch of a cottage door. The light streamed out and across the road, dazzling his eyes; yet he saw a picture of children

playing on the floor, a woman sewing, and a man smoking a long clay pipe.

"Who's you?" said the man.

"Can't you see? Come along wi' me, John Gibbons, at oncet."

The picture was broken up: the wife cried, "Bless us all!" the man muttered, "Well, I *am* blowed!" and the children clustered together with their fingers in their mouth, fixing wide eyes on the dog-whistle that hung from the button-hole of the keeper's velveteen coat.

"John, go, knock out Bill Johnson and his brother; tell them to bring a stick wi' 'em; there's poachers at it beyond Firleby wood."

"Never, sure-ly! All right, master; shall you up to Church Lane and then cut in through the bracken by the big oak tree?"

"Yes, yes, man alive; hurry off now. We'll meet under the oak. Good night, Mrs. Gibbons; sorry to trouble you."

"Ah, a pleasant-mannered man," smiled Mrs. Gibbons to herself, as she gathered up her work; "and I remember, when he first came into these parts, how we all fought shy of him with his outlandish speech; but he's mislarnt most of that now. Ay, and his wife, too; she was a thrifty soul, and many's the time she's come into my father's house and rated on us soundly for wasting good food. She were as bad as Parson's wife for that matter. But Mr. Forbes, he be a pleasant, God-fearing man as ever put money by in the savings bank."

Meanwhile, Mr. Forbes had been overtaken by his son and the mastiff, the latter bidding him good evening in the dark by pushing her soft muzzle into the keeper's hand.

At the bottom of the hill they crossed the churchyard, passed through a quiet street at the

backs of some houses, and turned up Church Lane towards the sandy knoll on which stood the big oak tree.

"What poachers can they be, father?" said Angus, when the village lay behind them, and the steep hill made fast walking inconvenient to the elder man.

"None of ours, I'll lay a wager. There's the cobbler yonder—he's at Nether Beckthorp; I met him going that way a couple of hours ago. Then there's those fishing lads—they don't net; they goes boldly out with a gun, as if the shooting was their own. No—don't 'e walk so fast, lad,—I shrewdly suspect it be some chaps from Yarmouth or Norwich, come down to get birds for the early market yonder. But they'll be mista'en, I reckon."

Soon they had climbed up to the knoll, and were waiting under the oak tree for their watchers and beaters.

"Ah!" said Mr. Forbes, getting his breath slowly, and speaking very low, "it was in this hollow tree that I found old Bob Smith's gun: that did for him; because the Squire—well! he never turned a body off, no matter what feckless thing he'd a done; but young Master Aubrey, he got wind on it, and never rested till he got shut of him, right out o' home and parish. That's why we've no poachers about our ways, 'cepting them fishing chaps; and I'll defy anybody to stop them—they're that gallous."

"They are very free and independent, to be sure; but I have heard say that they are sprung from a race that owned all this country before ever the Squire and his like came to England."

"Humph! book-larning, Angus, book-larning, I reckon; don't think much on it. However, they do behave as if they was the lords of the boat, and Squire was a bit o' figure-head as they could

knock off when they liked. What's that? be they coming?"

"Yes, the bitch wags her tail, and trembles."

"Did you go through the allotments, lad, this morning?"

"Yes, father, and I took Venus with me; we found no game hidden, but several of the tenants said they had been eaten up with hares."

"I dare say! and how many has they eaten?"

At this moment the watchers came up, and the keeper divided the party into two detachments, he and his son and the mastiff going straight through Firleby wood, while four men went round the wood on the high ground.

"You see, lads, if they run, they'll make for the Station Road. Be quiet and don't ye talk now."

Thus they parted. The keeper and his son climbed the steep hill towards the wood; they were deep in bracken and moved slowly; further up the hill the bracken gave way to heather, and on the top was a fir wood lowering dark against the drifting clouds. They could scarce see the gap in the hedge which led to the wood, but when once under the shadow of the trees all was mirk, and many a stumble they made against the big roots.

At last they reached a more open space, where a raised footpath had been made and a trench cut on either side; here they walked in Indian file, Angus leading with the mastiff.

Every now and then they paused to listen for any sound that might betoken the whereabouts of the poachers, but the only sound they heard was the rustling in the tree-tops.

On reaching the highest ground in the wood, where the bracken was long, a hare came running up to them, not seeming to see them though they stood right in her way.

"Hist, lad! she's been disturbed; they must be down t'other side of the wood; you go straight on, I'll cut across this 'ere way."

The keeper turned off to the right; when he reached the bottom, he would find a sandy lane between the two woods.

Angus went on with the mastiff till he came to the brow of the hill. Straight in front of him, about two miles off, lay the sea; he could just discern the lights of two or three vessels that were passing along the coast. Here he stopped to listen; he could plainly hear his father's steps as he brushed through the fern or trod upon a stick. There was no sound from the opposite hill, yet the mastiff threw up her nose and growled.

"Well, you know best, old girl, so I'll follow your lead. Hi! good bitch."

The mastiff, thus encouraged, put her muzzle to the ground, and strained at the leash, making more for the direction taken by the gamekeeper. They had scarce gone forty paces when a shout arose from the opposite hill; then came the sounds of a scuffle; sticks were being used. Angus rushed down the hill, pulling at the mastiff, for the bitch wanted to go to her master. Then suddenly came a gun-shot on his right; it might have been the keeper peppering a poacher: but no; he remembered that his father had taken a rook-rifle, and the report which he had just heard was more like that of some old blunderbuss.

Angus stopped and shouted, "Father, are you all right?"

There was no reply, but the mastiff trembled and strained eagerly.

"Dash the dog! I must go where you like, I suppose."

Angus struck off to his right, hearing the shouts

grow fainter over the hill; suddenly the hound began to quest about in the bracken, turning here and there once or twice, then suddenly came to a stop and nosed about uneasily.

It was too dark to see, so Angus put his foot out; something soft lay there, as he could feel; he then stooped down and put out his hand.

"By all that's—it's a man! Come, mate, speak; are you hurt?"

He tried to lift the body; what was his horror to feel that his hand was on his father's velveteen coat!

"Father, father! Speak to me! Where are you hit?"

There was no reply.

"Good God, have pity on me!" groaned the poor fellow, almost beside himself with grief and anxiety.

Then, recollecting himself, he pulled out a box of matches, and lighting one held it to his father's face.

The ashy colour and half-closed eyes sickened him with fear. The match spluttered and went out. He lit another, and looked about for the wound; there was blood trickling from the back of the head, just above the neck, and not far from the ear. What was to be done? the second match had gone out, there was only one left. This time he piled a few dry sticks and leaves together, and lit them with his last match; they began to burn with a crackling noise, but there was more smoke than fire, and he could see no better.

"If I leave him here, while I go for the doctor, he may bleed to death," thought Angus; "yet I can do no good by staying: he is hit in the head. Poor father! what can I do?"

The unfortunate young man seemed dazed; he was now but twenty-four years old. It flashed across

his mind on a sudden how kind his father had been to him, and how often he had caused his father pain. What! was it all over now? Should he never have another chance of proving that he was grateful, that he loved his father?

He buried his face in his hands, and groaned. Presently he knelt by the stricken man and prayed aloud—

"O Lord, have mercy on us both; if it be Thy will, save my father. O dear Lord, if it by Thy will, save me from this bitter sorrow. O dear! O dear! what shall I do? God help me! God help me!"

There was a rustle in the grass; it was only a little rabbit sitting up on its hind legs and wondering what was going on. But it served to recall Angus to a sense of his position. He looked round for the mastiff: she had gone; he was deserted, then, and alone. He pulled up some fern, and piled it up for a cushion for his father's head; he bound the wound as well as he could with a handkerchief, and took his father's gold repeating watch (which had been a present from a former master), and stumbled, half dazed with anguish, down the hill.

When the wood got a little clearer he shouted; there was a distant echo which seemed to mock his efforts.

"Help! the keeper's shot!"

The faint echo brought back the cry, "Help—the shot!" with what seemed a parody of his despairing tones. Then with a sigh he jumped into the lane, and started off at a run for Nether Beckthorp.

There lived the doctor; there lived the village policeman: these were the only two he could think of who might serve him in this extremity. His legs seemed to faint under him, he staggered and had to rest against a gate. Prayers and anguished cries

of "Oh, my poor father! Oh, my sister!" broke from him at intervals. At length he said aloud to himself, "This is madness. I have got Jean to think about. God helping me I'll go on with this and do my best. Poor Jeannie! it will be worse for her—far."

CHAPTER III.

TAVERN BABBLE.

THE parlour of the "Three Jolly-boats Tavern" was reeking with tobacco smoke; a sort of informal village council was sitting — sitting round a large table, engaged this evening, as heretofore, in discussing sundry glasses of grog.

Sometimes a word was thrown in which set the folk a-thinking, and after divers whiffs at the churchwarden some argument was advanced for or against the idea; immediately their tongues were loosed, and they spoke all together. A fine lot of men were these fisher-folk of Nether Beckthorp; there seemed to be a strong family likeness amongst them, and, indeed, it was said that all the fisher-folk in the village were cousins, more or less removed. It is a fact that they were nearly all Fletchers; and, to avoid confusion, it was usual for each family to choose a nickname, such as Billy Key Fletcher, Tom Spade Fletcher, Dick Nozzle Fletcher, by which simple means every one (occasionally) got his own letters from the post-office.

There were, however, two distinct types of face;

the one dark-eyed with Roman nose and black shaggy hair, the other fair and freckled, with bright red hair and blue eyes. They had none of the cowed and deferential air so often seen in the country, but stood up and looked a stranger straight in the face, and answered or not as the whim took them. Yet, as a rule, you would get a civil and courteous reply; they had none of the rudeness and ill-breeding of your mill-hands of Lancashire. If they were independent, it was because the ocean free had made them so; and because they were strong they could afford to deal with you as an equal deals: they did not give themselves airs to frighten you, and make you think them stronger than they were.

"Well, I say Squire has done well by us all along," said a black-haired giant, clapping his fist so hard on the table that all the half-empty glasses jumped up and rattled, as if they were saying, "Hear, hear!"

Then came a pause and sundry puffs.

"He has so," said another; "them allotments yonder—what should we be without them, I'd like to know?"

"No pig, no greens, no taters," said a third slowly, tapping the table softly as each item was ticked off.

"Howsomever," said a thin, red-haired young man, "Squire gets more out on us than he would if he farmed it hisself."

"He do—that's right—that's right," were the sententious comments of nearly every member of the council.

"We did well enough till that young twopenny came home to rule the roast."

"What's he done? d'ye mean Squire's son?"

"Of course; hasn't he started game-preserving,

like them south-country chaps? Why, afore he came trapessing about they turnips, we wasn't eat up by hares and pheasants."

"That's right," was the repeated comment; and grave heads were shaken over the Squire's fall from the path of righteousness.

"I think we ought to make it a subject of prayer at our meetings i' chapel," said an elder of the Primitive Methodists, pursing up his lips as one who has been painfully obliged to have recourse to a desperate remedy.

"The chapel's a freehold," added another encouragingly.

There was a good deal of meaning in these last words and the council took seven minutes by the post-office clock to gather it all in and spread it, as it were, to dry on the beach of thought. At last an old hand replied—

"We should be freer men, if we had no allotments."

That required some soaking, and one or two spoons began looking for sugar at the bottom of the tumbler.

"You must forgive me trying back, mates; but I think it be the over-preserving of game that does the mischief."

All heads were turned to look at this speaker, who was none other than Harry Bent, the radical cobbler of Beckthorp. He was a thin, puny body, with a large head and ears that flapped to and fro, as though Nature had at first intended them for a young elephant, but finding them a misfit, had bestowed them on Harry.

"You will find that most of our troubles now will arise from this source; the abundance of game not only devours our garden stuff, but attracts a lot of rascals from the big towns. We were once

living here as in a garden of Paradise—innocent and neighbourly: now we shall be visited by ruffians; our own young men will be tempted to snare a hare; then comes Master Policeman and claps young Fletcher in gaol. Nether Beckthorp will wax angry when her boys are sent to gaol for spoiling Master Aubrey's little toy."

"Ah, that's right! that's right, cobbler."

The cobbler cleared his throat as he glanced round for his applause, which he mentally collected and put in his breast pocket; for he was not without his weakness—he loved to hear his own praise.

"Not that I mean to say a word against Mr. Forbes; we all know him to be cute, but we like him none the worse for knowing which way his head is put on."

"That's right." The words were accompanied by a clink of glasses.

"Mr. Forbes has a duty to perform to his master, and he performs that duty faithfully; at the same time, no one can say that he does not think of us and sympathize with our wrongs; and if he were to walk into this room this very minute, we should one and all extend to Mr. Forbes the right hand of friendship."

Only two members had had time to murmur, "That's right!" when the door was slammed open, and an old man came in head first, holding up his hand for silence.

"Mates," said he solemnly, "there's been a bad accident."

"Whose boat is't, old Ned?" they all seemed to ask together.

"Tisn't nobody's boat, my lads; 'twas on the land, not on the water."

"Fallen off the cliff?" queried the ready-minded cobbler.

"No—shot by them poachers."

"Who, lad?"

"Him as I heard you name when I lifted sneck —Mr. Forbes!"

"Mr. Forbes!"

"Well, I never!"

"Poor man!"

"Say, old Ned; is he dead?"

"That remains to be seen; you see, I was talking to our policeman on the cliff edge, when who should come running up but young Forbes; 'Sergeant,' says he, in a voice all of a tremble-like, 'my father has been shot by poachers in Firleby wood; get some men to carry him home while I go wait for the doctor.'

"'Where does he lie, master?'

"'Near the big chestnut tree, not far from the road; but I'll be after you before you get there.'

"And with that he made off to the doctor's—and I came straight away and told you, mates."

There was a long silence; the news had shocked them more than they liked to let it appear.

Then, one by one, they got up and silently went out; one by one, they each went home to tell the news; and, shortly after, they might have been seen creeping up the sandy lane to Firleby wood-side.

Angus had called first at the doctor's house, and had been told that the doctor would be ready in ten minutes; he had only just returned from a long round. He had inquired where the wound was, and had seemed to think there was no great hurry.

Angus was now going back to call for him; but on his way he looked in at a small house that stood in its own little garden. He hardly tapped before lifting the latch; in the front parlour a bright fire was blazing, before which sat a young girl with coal-black hair and fine dark eyes; a tall man was

standing by the chimney, reading a hymn aloud, or rather crooning it over softly to himself.

"John Fletcher, may I have a word with you outside?"

The girl had turned round on hearing the voice, and perceiving by the deadly pallor on the face of Angus that something was wrong, had jumped up and followed her brother to the door.

"It's bad news I bring, John, and I would not fright Minnie."

"Minnie, my lass, dost hear what Angus Forbes says?"

"Let him tell it in my presence; he has asked me before now to bear half his sorrows—if it be a sorrow,—and I am always ready to do that, if I won't go any further."

"Thank you, Minnie; but indeed it is a sorrow, and the heaviest a man can bear. It's my poor father—who lies up yonder in Firleby wood, shot by a dog of a poacher."

Minnie pressed the young keeper's arm. That was all he had come for: that bit of feeling gave him fresh pluck to do his duty.

"Good night, friends. I thought I must call and tell you. I am going for the doctor now."

"Stop! I'll go with thee," said John, putting on his cap.

The girl went and sat down by the fire. The tears were flowing down her cheeks: she was following Angus in fancy. Let her be.

CHAPTER IV.

MINNIE FLETCHER.

MINNIE FLETCHER sat a long while gazing into the fire. The simmering and purring of the kettle produced upon her gradually a feeling of calm and peace; it seemed to be whispering to her in a soft and confidential undertone, "Don't you be cast down, Minnie; you have your pretty face and saucy tongue, two lovers avowed, and half the parish ready to bid for you at a chance; don't take on like that. Who knows? haply young Angus Forbes will get his father's place, and how will you like living up at the lodge yonder?" But when that thought crossed Minnie's mind, she shuddered. It was a brutal, selfish idea, and one to be scuffed out of the place of thought.

Angus loved her, no doubt; he was a fine, shapely young man. He had a sweet smile, a pleasant clean face, a musical voice, with just a touch of Scotch intonation in it that always seemed to Minnie like a revelation when she listened to it. Here was a music that always surprised her; when everybody else dropped his voice to a murmur or a whine, here was this northern peasant actually

chanting a syllable here and there in some quaint, forgotten key. She could sit and listen to the music of it without heeding the sense.

But then, there were other things to be thought on.

The Forbes family were strangers; they had no part nor lot in Beckthorp; and it displeased all her family that she should marry a foreigner. Well, as to the family, she had lost her father at sea, years ago; and her mother died when her little brother was born. But there was John, her elder brother, and Aunt Bessie (if she was to be counted, being not quite right in her mind, on one sad point), and the rest of the parish of Nether Beckthorp, who were her cousins, one and all.

A girl cannot lightly fly in the face of public opinion. True, there was nothing to be said against Angus; he was sober, hard-working, conscientious, and, as she thought, religious. Not, perhaps, carrying his religion on his lips as so many of her people were wont to do; but, then, you can't expect landsmen to have so vivid a feeling of the presence of God as the sailor who commits his life twice a day, perhaps, to the perils of the deep and the merciful protection of the Almighty.

Then there was her other lover, Giles Fletcher. Such a nice young man he was! When you saw him on Sundays, and he was wearing his dark blue serge guernsey and his sealskin cap, he looked quite bewitching. To Minnie's eye there seemed to be so much more colour in his face than in Angus Forbes's. Angus's very light hair and very light blue eyes were well enough, no doubt: but when Giles looked at you with those soft brown eyes you felt there was something to look at; they made a warm feeling about Minnie's heart. Then, Giles had beautiful patches of rose-red colour in his dimpled cheeks, whereas Angus was more of the

brick-dust tint, and he was also freckled. Yet—Minnie sighed as she said it to herself—Giles was not over steady; he was so impetuous and headstrong, so proud and wilful, that even the Squire had no control over him.

Often and often, when a little boy, he had cut chapel service, to get birds' eggs; lately he had gone out in his boat on the Sabbath, to the horror of all pious folk, who looked for nothing better than to find his drowned corpse at low water. But Providence apparently was reserving him for some other fate.

Poor Minnie! it was evident that her heart said "Marry Giles," while her common sense whispered, "Thou fool, marry Angus." The question she was debating just now before the fire was, "Ought a good girl to wed the man she fancies best, or the man she thinks will make her the best husband?"

The stories she had read in fiction had taught her to prefer love as an unerring instinct, a God-given passion of perfection; but the stories she had seen enacted in real life had taught her something very different. When she considered the short, one-volume histories of her kinsfolks and acquaintances, mostly tragedies, though many were yet "to be continued," and the issue was not yet known as being likely to have a happy ending or no,—when she ran over these living examples of life, she could not help confessing to herself that love was often blind; that those who married out of a girlish and boyish fancy for each other soon began to weary of one another's company, if they did not actually quarrel; that it seemed better to choose a man for some quality which would last, which would perhaps improve instead of vanishing away—for a quality which might help to make the woman a better wife as well as more comfortable,

Heigho! she sighed again, when she got thus far, and her little saucy face, with nose tip-tilted for very scorn at her baser self, was just being thrown back as she folded her bare arms behind her head, when the door quietly opened and a young fisherman peeped in.

"May I come in, Minnie Fletcher?"

"Oh, Giles! how you have startled me, to be sure!"

"Sorry for that, lassie; there was a time when Giles had a welcome in this house." The boy had thrown all his utmost reproach into the tones of this speech.

"And so you have now, Cousin Giles; come in, and sit you down."

Giles took off his cap, and seated himself on a chair by the side of the girl whom he was courting.

"Well, you look very sad and glum, cousin," said Minnie, with a provoking smile; "perhaps it's the bad news you've heard."

"Perhaps it is, Minnie; I saw young Forbes come along here this evening. I expect he felt bound to tell you first."

"So you were jealous, silly boy? Well, perhaps you've cause to be jealous; for you know well enough he'd be fine and glad to get me for his wife."

"Yes, and folk do say that you are turning your back on your own kith and kin to run after a foreigner."

"Oh, folk say I run after him, do they?" Minnie's dark eyes had a dangerous fire in them just now. She went on bitterly: "Folk always think they know other people's business best, but you can go and tell the poor, silly folk that if one's own kith and kin are not dependable, one had better trust to strangers."

"What dost mean by dependable?" said Giles, colouring slightly.

"Why, look here, Giles; the long and the short is that if I could trust you, I'd rather a deal have you for my husband."

"Well?" said Giles, kicking a coal in the grate nervously.

"I cannot trust you, Giles Fletcher; as like as not, after we had been married two years or less, you would be off to America, or somewhere, and I should be left crying."

"Nonsense, Minnie; you know well enough that my love is no ordinary love. I don't want to seem to praise myself, but I have always felt that I was a bit above the general run of Beckthorp chaps. I feel something in me that tells me I can rise in the world—and I will."

Minnie laughed a little scornful laugh.

"My poor lad, before you talk of beating your neighbours, you must try and conquer yourself; you're not your own master!"

"Not my own master! then who is, I'd like to know?"

"Your evil passions, Giles. Oh, believe me; if you don't first learn to govern them, they'll make a slave of you."

"I don't know what you're a-talking about," he said sulkily.

"Oh yes, you do; but I'll put it this way. A year ago you and I had a serious talk together—do you mind it? We was sitting on the heather yonder, one Sunday afternoon—that day you kissed me, and I slapped your face—you must remember?"

"Aye, lass; you fetched me a good un. I'm not going to forget it."

"Well; then I rounded on you for going to the public-house, and for rowing about with all the

good-for-nothings, and for poaching over the Squire's land. Now, mind me, Giles Fletcher, you caught hold of my hand and swore you would give up all those things for the great love you bare me. Dost mind that, lad?"

"Yes, and I meant it, and I have tried—you don't know."

"Well, if you've tried, I am very sorry for your ill success. I believed, at first, that you would give up your old pals because of your love for me—no ordinary love, I believed it to be. But I was sadly taken in, Giles: you have been seen on Saturday night the worse for liquor; you think nothing of swearing, and breaking the Sabbath, and stealing the Squire's game; and yet you come and ask me to trust you with my life, my honour, my happiness!"

"You should not believe all the lying tales you hear about me, Minnie Fletcher. I deny that any one has seen me drunk. I don't swear, as a rule; and, if I did, it means nothing—it's only a word more or less just to give weight. As to breaking the Sabbath, I'm not a Jew; if the good folk in the Bible might break it, I don't see why I may not—going out in a boat is very like going for a walk."

"Oh, you know it shocks the religious feelings of all your friends."

"Then I'm sorry for their common sense. Then there's the poaching, as it is called—why, bless your heart! I do that on principle. No, don't laugh; I'm serious. Landlords have no right to breed a lot of wild animals that come and eat up other folks' corn. Why, if I was to keep young tigers and they was to get amongst the Squire's sheep, what a fuss there would be! Chaps would come down from London and get it all put in the daily papers. But my tigers would only be doing the very same

thing as the landlord's pheasants and hares do. That's why I go and shoot the creatures, as a protest against a wicked wrong to the poor man."

Minnie turned a roguish look upon him, and asked, "You don't eat the hares when you have caught them, I suppose?"

"Not often; I generally give them away. I don't see any harm in that: the creatures are wild; every Englishman has a right to——"

"There; that'll do, Cousin Giles. You are a clever boy, but I doubt your fine ideas will bring you some day into trouble. Anyhow, I can't help distrusting them and you—so long as you go on like that. Drop my hand, sir! I have given you a year of trial, and you go on in your old ways,—drop my hand, please."

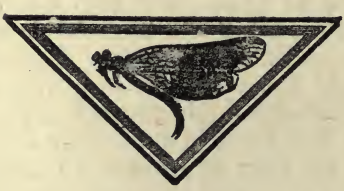
"Oh, Minnie darling, has it come to this? I do indeed love you more than anything else in this world. I did not know you cared so much for these—these faults of mine. But now I see you do, I swear most solemnly I will turn over a new leaf, if you will give me one more chance. Come, dearest!"

What could the poor girl do? She loved her cousin; perhaps she might rescue him from a sinful life. It was this thought more than anything else which made her offer no resistance when he put his arm about her waist and promised—oh, so faithfully—that he would give up his old evil associates and amend his ways.

And the kiss that he left upon her half-averted cheek was, as it were, an earnest of his good intentions.

And poor Angus! Would it not have added a terrible weight to his already over-burdened heart, as he helped to carry his dead father home that night, if he could have seen the girl he loved so well half pledging herself to his rival? But it is

well for us that we cannot see through brick walls; it is well for us that we cannot always read the thoughts of our neighbours. Enough for us is the burden of the day, as God has ordered it. The sorrow of Angus and of Jean was enough for one evening. Let the door of the lodge close on them in their anguish; we have no business prying about into those mysteries of human suffering.



CHAPTER V.

THE HALL AND THE CLUB.

IT was not until eight o'clock that evening that the sad news of the head keeper's death reached the Hall. The Squire, a hale old man, with weather-beaten face, was discussing with his son the arrangements for the morrow's shooting. The room in which they sat was very small, but comfortable lounges made it a snug smoking-room ; from the walls were suspended antlers and models of salmon life-size, one or two Indian knives, a sheaf of poisoned arrows from the Pacific, and two very bright double-barrelled guns, of a make long gone out of use. Master Aubrey, the son and heir, was rather short ; but his collars were high enough to make him hold himself at his best—they acted like a bearing-rein upon him. Some people in the village said that Master Aubrey always appeared to be standing on tip-toe, as if he was trying to look over the garden wall. No doubt he was annoyed at being so short ; but the good folk would not have thought any ill of him for that. Only, unfortunately, his answers were every bit as short as his legs, and

this set up the backs of tenants and labourers alike.

Master Aubrey had reddish hair, and not too much of it. His age was twenty-seven. He had a good eye for billiards and shooting; he attended race meetings, and only betted on very safe events. People wondered how it was that the Squire's son should be so haughty and irritable, when his father was so "uncommon nice." I suppose he had had his own way too much—no one liked to oppose or contradict him; and now very few had the courage.

Well, father and son, both dressed for dinner, were having a few minutes of private chat about the partridges and the gentlemen who had come down to shoot the partridges; they were arranging who should have the best ground, and where they would have lunch taken.

"Never mind, Aubrey; it's not worth while to get hot about so small a point as that. As I said before, I am expecting Forbes every minute. I told him to look in before dinner."

"Forbes is much too independent, father; you don't keep him in his place. Now, I'll bet you a crown he won't be here till we have finished dinner. Oh, here comes Brooks."

Brooks, the butler, entered with a solemn face.

"Well, Brooks," said the Squire's son, "what is it? Forbes got the toothache? Can't come out to-night, I suppose?"

"No, sir; he can't come out indeed!" said the butler, with a sigh.

"There! I told you so, father. This is past bearing. Can't come out, can't he? Just present my compliments to Mr. Forbes, and say we really cannot do without him."

Brooks seemed to take no notice of this remark,

but advanced into the room and muttered something into the Squire's ear.

"Dead? Who's dead?" asked the Squire, putting his hand to his ear.

"The head keeper, sir, was found dead in one of the woods to-night."

Neither of the gentlemen spoke; the news was so strange and unexpected that it robbed them of speech.

"Was it a fit, Brooks?" said the old Squire, a tear glistening in his eye.

"No, sir; he was shot in the back of the head by a poacher."

"Who brought the news? Is his son here?"

"In the pantry, sir, at this minute. The poor young man's very down about it, very much so."

"Poor fellow! poor fellow! I should like to see him, Brooks, for a few minutes. Ask him to come this way."

When the butler had gone, the Squire turned to his son, saying—

"I should very much like to see the poor lad alone, Aubrey. We ought to spare his feelings as much as we can, you know."

"All right; but of course we can't put off to-morrow's sport?"

"I suppose not; don't say anything to our guests about this; we cannot well disappoint them, Aubrey."

When Angus came into the smoking-room, he found the Squire alone, leaning his head upon his hand as he stood by the fireplace.

The old gentleman stepped forward, and took Angus by the hand.

"My lad, you have met a great sorrow early in life; bear it manfully. Your father and I have been

old friends together these twenty years. You must let me be your father now."

These kind words were too much for Angus; he was quite overcome for a minute or two; then, with an effort, he said—

"You have always been the kindest of masters to us. I will tell my sister what you have been so good, sir, as to say; and I'm sure it is a real comfort, when one is in trouble, to find such true sympathy."

"Now, tell me, Angus; have you any idea who it was? How many were there poaching, and where was it?"

"It was in Firleby wood bottom, near the lower road. Father and I were at tea when my young brother came in to say there were poachers about. We set off at once, taking some men with us; we had not been in the wood a quarter of an hour when I heard a shot fired; I had the mastiff bitch with me, and she found my poor father lying in the bracken, stone-dead."

"Ha! the mastiff! could not some of you have followed on the scent?"

"Well, sir, I had lost touch with the others, and while I was looking after father the bitch made off."

"She would not go away for nothing. I have known a dog of her breed track a man down. She must be followed at once; and telegrams must be sent to villages and stations round, that the police may be on the look-out. I think, if I write out the forms, you might take them. There's nothing like having something to do for curing the heart-ache."

When the Squire had written out his telegrams, Angus said—

"I ought to mention, sir, that, when I returned to the wood with the doctor and the policeman, we found in the bracken a shortened ram-rod. I've got it up at the lodge."

"Ah! that's very important—that may give us a clue. I hope there is no suspicion falling on any of our own people."

"No, sir; we found our own people all at home. The Vicar has been round with the policeman. It's more likely to be some riff-raff from the big towns; they'll fire at anybody as soon as at a rabbit. I don't think anybody here would want to hurt my father."

"No, I am sure of that, Angus. Well, good evening to you; and—oh, I say—we can do very well without you to-morrow. You must not think of doing any work to-morrow."

"Thank you, sir; but I'm very sorry to put you out so."

Thus Angus went away, gladdened a little by that kindly sympathy.

Let us now look into the village club, and see how they took the news of the keeper's murder.

The club had been started by the Squire some ten years ago; he had always refused to have a public-house in his village, but when Mr. Fraser came to be vicar he made so strong a point of having a club-room, where the labourer could get a snug seat by the fire and a cup of coffee, that at last they knocked two cottages into one, and started the village club-room.

After a time they made the experiment of keeping beer on tap, having a bye-law that no one was to be served with more than two glasses of beer in one evening. At the present time that amount had been raised to three glasses.

No ill effects had followed; though the Miss Browns, who were worthy spinsters and teetotallers, had prophesied that the admission of a beer-barrel would be the ruin of the whole country. The Vicar was one of those ruddy-faced, hearty men

who do not seek to restrict a parishioner so long as the man can drink within limits; though, when he was a curate in a large town, he had taken the pledge to encourage those drunkards who could not be kept sober except by total abstention.

At one end of the room was the table where tea, coffee, and eatables could be had; little tables scattered about served as centres for groups of talkers; there were seats for old folk by the fire, papers and magazines at the end table. There was a ladies' room, where no smoking was allowed; a good kitchen and scullery, and a small room for bagatelle and other games. To-night the room was very full; the sad news had fetched everybody out to hear and discuss the latest intelligence. They came in very quietly, and seemed awe-struck at the blow which had fallen upon the village.

About nine o'clock there entered, somewhat to the surprise of the members, a young gentleman of pleasant look and manners, apparently not more than eighteen years old. He called for a cup of coffee, observing that the Squire had invited him to look in at the club; then, as he was casting his eye around, noticing how dumb the members had become at his presence, he lifted his cap, and said in a clear voice—

"Ladies and gentlemen, I ought to apologize for intruding where I have no right to come; but I was telling your good Squire to-night how much I am interested in these clubs, and he said at once, 'Go down and have a cup of coffee with them, and see for yourself,'—and so, here I am."

This short speech was received with a hum of applause and clinking of spoons, and many a one said to his neighbour, "Him's the right sort," "Bless his bonny face! how nice he do speak, to be sure."

The visitor sat down; and, of course, Harry Bent,

the radical cobbler, soon got near him. There's nobody likes talking to his superiors more than your radical and your revolutionist.

"Good evening, sir; you come at a melancholy time."

"Yes, we have been talking about it up at the Hall; the Squire tried to keep it from us, but the very doors and tables were creaking with the news. He was liked, I think?"

"Oh yes; when they brought his body past here, all the club turned out and followed as far as the keeper's lodge."

"Are there any poachers in the village?"

This was an unfortunate question; for, although Harry Bent was no poacher, yet he had been known not unfrequently to sally forth when good folk were in their beds, carrying with him certain snares and a nice half-bred dog; they say that he also kept a gun hidden behind a manure-heap, and that his pockets bulged in the early hours when he trudged home. He coloured just a little as he replied—

"We be all honest folks hereabouts, master; though we prefer the old sport to the new. When the master walked his birds up among the turnips, there was less nibbling of poor men's peas and spinage. I don't hold with this new-fangled battew, or what you call it."

"No, nor I; but at present I'm only a boy at school, and have had little experience of country life."

"Indeed, sir? Pray, are you intended for a country squire?"

"I believe so; unless I go into the army. But it seems to me that there is so much to be done now in improving village life, that it is our duty to tackle that knotty problem."

"Sir, I am delighted to find a young gentleman

who has such fine sentiments; hope you'll live up to them, sir,—no offence intended, you know; but pleasure comes in and ousts duty, doesn't it? I dare say, now, you have been reading the letters in the papers about village life?"

"Yes, and Professor Fawcett's book on the position of the labourer."

"Well done, sir; that's better than learning Latin and Greek, ain't it? Now I'll give you a lesson from real life. Hi! Adam, old Adam, come and tell us about what you think of life in these 'ere parts."

Old Adam grinned, and scratched his head; it was rather a large order for him. The stranger shook hands with him, saying—

"Do you find field-work worth having in these times?"

"Well, sir, I'm good for nowt else, 'cep' the work'us."

"Dear me! Haven't you saved anything yet in all these years?"

"Saved anything? Harry, what do 'e mean?"

"Put by owt, Adam, 'gainst a rainy day."

Adam sat back and laughed till he coughed, the idea of saving money was too ludicrous; they really must not be so funny!

"Lord love you, sir! Saved owt? Well, that's a good un. I've had ten children: seven girls went out to service, one son got hisself sawed in two in a saw-mill, t'other two went to London or somewheres, and got work on the railway. There hasn't been no sulky ones in my family a heating their heads off; but yet I hasn't put by a penny. Well, yer see, when I was young we got perhaps twelve shilling a week, with stoppages for rainy days; we had no 'lotments i' those days."

"I suppose you find them a great help?"

"The young men do, sir: but they rob a man of

a good deal of his rest; it's everlasting slave and worry. When you've been at work ever since five i' the morning, you don't feel werry fit for the 'lotment. Nor you can't be i' two places i' the same time; but just when your master wants you most, you wants to be at your own piece of ground; and werry often the 'lotment is too far from yer house, and the walking takes it out of 'e worse nor the work does."

"I see," said the boy, looking disappointed.

"This parish, sir," said the cobbler, "is quite a model one; yet we can't keep the young uns: they all leave us as fast as they can. Why do they? —because they can get better pay near the big towns. What is there to keep 'em here? No pretty girls—all out at service,—no theatres or concerts, no cottages if they do want to marry. I don't blame them. Of course, they go where they can live in comfort, where the water's fit to drink, and the thatch is kept good on the roof, and where they can save up a bit to end their days on. We country folks doesn't like the idea of a work'us ending."

Mr. Bent would have gone on for another hour, had not the arrival of the Squire and one of his guests brought him to a full-stop.

The Squire went to the far end of the hall, and made a little speech about the murder of the game-keeper, and ended by asking everybody to help him to bring the culprit to justice. He concluded thus—

"I see you have been entertaining my young friend, Lord Haverden, who is deeply interested in all that concerns our village life; and I hope we shall prevail upon him to spend a few weeks with us. I am glad to see that Adam is sitting close to his lordship to defend him against the revolutionary doctrines of Mr. Bent."

There was much craning of necks and whispering when Lord Haverden's name was announced; and when the visitors had left the club, old Adam said—

"Now, who'd a thought it was a real live lord I was a speaking to i' that how?"

"Ay, boy," rejoined the radical, "but I slapped him on the leg—and I'm glad on't; 'twill be something to talk about to the day of my death."

CHAPTER VI.

AUNT BESSIE.

NEVER had Beckthorp churchyard been so full as that afternoon when Mr. Forbes was put in his grave. Of course all the Squire's people were there; but many young farmers had driven in to pay this last token of respect, and there was a large contingent of fishermen and their wives, who made the hymn which was sung at the funeral very impressive; for the fisher-folk were more musical than the agricultural labourers. And as yet suspicion had not fallen on any one in Beckthorp; half the parish had gone to see the ram-rod, which now hung in the lodge, by permission of the Squire. The mastiff, too, came in for a share of attention; for she had come home late on that eventful night, with drops of blood about her muzzle and chest, and a nasty stab in the shoulder. Even the visitors who were staying at Nether Beckthorp for the bathing got interested in the mystery, and more than one of them assumed the character of amateur detective, hunting the woods about for traces of gun or knife, much to the annoyance of the shooting party.

A few days after the funeral a coal-barge was seen to anchor off the village; about three o'clock in the afternoon a small boat put off for shore. The street from Beckthorp to Nether Beckthorp ended abruptly at the cliff edge; a low wall prevented you driving down on to the stones and breaking your neck; but if you wished to walk to the shore, there was a narrow, winding path by which you could descend.

At the top of the cliff there was a wooden seat, whence you could look out over the sea; this was a favourite lounge for the old salts and for visitors who wanted to talk to the natives.

But this afternoon there were some children, looking rather scared and clinging to their nursemaids' skirts, as a well-dressed woman of about thirty-five years passed quickly and restlessly to and fro. She was tall and thin, and had raven-black hair and black eyes with red circles round them; it was a face that must have once been beautiful, but suffering had marred and scarred it out of all recognition. There was something very awesome in her fierce, hungry eyes, and in the low mutterings to which she gave vent.

"She is talking to herself. What does she say?" said one child.

"She goes backwards and forwards like the tiger in the Zoo," said another.

The nursemaids looked for enlightenment to the four or five fishermen who stood about, calmly smoking and taking no heed.

"Who is yon woman?" at length one ventured to ask.

The old man drew his pipe slowly out of his mouth, and said—

"We calls her Aunt Bessie."

A little group of children began to gather round the fisherman.

"You see," he began, pressing down the baccy affectionately into the bowl of his pipe with the thumb of his left hand, "she is not quite herself to-day, poor thing."

"Why not? why not? What is the matter with her?"

"It's all along o' that there smack, miss."

"Lor'! who's been a-smacking on her?"

"Bah! you don't take me properly; 'tain't no smack she's had. Haven't you seen her sitting here every afternoon from two till near five, as quiet as a mouse?"

"Yes; gazing out over the sea and knitting, knitting, knitting."

"That's it—and waiting, waiting, waiting," said the sailor; "but to-day she sees that there wessel, and she's excited, ain't she?"

"Tell us all about it, please."

"'Tain't much of a yarn, young ladies; howsomever, that young woman was twenty years back the prettiest girl in the place, and there's heaps on 'em wanted to marry her. But no! there wasn't nobody good enough for she; they got nowt but snubs for their pains, I reckon. Till, one day, a young man as had a farm up country came and took lodgings for the summer in her house, got a fancy for her, courted her, and—well, they were spliced that September in Beckthorp Church."

The old man took a few meditative whiffs, and resumed—

"The bridegroom took a fancy to a row in one of them small boats in the afternoon; he went by hisself, and left his wife in the house, packing up of her things for to go to her new home. It was about equinox time, I reckon, and the sky had a wild look—little bits o' cloud scudding across, and a film forming over the blue."

Here he took a few more whiffs and looked across the sea.

"Aye, it were John Fletcher—he says, 'Look here, lad; don't you go out fur, or you'll get blowed away.'

"'All right, old chap,' says bridegroom, 'I knows summut about boats by this time; tell Bessie to have a cup o' tea ready by I come back, will yer?'

"So he paddled away. Water was calm and clear; I mind it as though it were but yesterday. The poor young man pushed off, with a crowd of young lads making fun of him, and shouting, 'Where's your bride, lad? You've forgotten Miss Bessie.'

"And he, as blithe as you like, took off his hat and waved it i' the air, singing a jolly good song the while. Ah! he was a hearty young man—he was. Well, he rowed out to sea, stopping now and again to peer down into the clear water, and, maybe, admire the seaweed and the shells—they look very pretty, miss, all tangled about the white rocks at bottom.—O Lord! how Aunt Bessie do excite herself now she sees the boat ashore."

The listeners turned to look; there was the poor woman waving a white pocket-handkerchief with frantic gestures from the cliff. She finished by running down the path to the beach.

"Ah, poor thing! will nothing teach you 'tis no manner of use? Where was I in my yarn? Let's see! Oh! ah!—And then a gust of wind came clap! the water turned all dark in a moment; the wind caught the boat like a mill-stream with a feather, and in five minutes he had gone out of sight; for it came on all dark. We got out some of our boats and sailed backwards and forwards, but to this day neither he nor his boat have been seen again. What, miss? how long ago? A deal over ten year, aye, fifteen year it must be. And every after-

noon in the year, since then, has that poor, silly creetur been down to the town-end to gaze over the sea for her husband. She allers puts on her wedding-dress, in case he should come; but, as you see, whenever there's any vessel in the offing, or any strange boat comes ashore, she's that mad with hope and fear that she ramps about and talks to hersen, and there's no holding her at all—poor creetur!"

At this moment they saw Aunt Bessie approach the group of men who were surrounding the small boat. Almost immediately afterwards she turned to come back, holding her head down. When she got nearer they could hear her sobbing—sobbing, and yet talking to herself.

"Oh, Harry, you said you would come back when tea was ready!—too bad, too bad! I've prayed and prayed till my knees were sore. What does God care for a poor woman like me? He will drive me mad one of these days. Harry! Harry! Harry!"

The last three cries were so heartrending that the children ran away, and the nursemaids wept; but the old sailor smoked on calmly, and when Aunt Bessie passed him, he said—

"I'm afraid he's not come to-day, Bessie?"

"No; but he will—he shall—he shall come!" she screamed in a fierce tone, with flashing eyes, causing such a sensation among the visitors that the little boys flocked about her, like hounds about a wounded lioness.

However, one of the fishermen moved them back, and walked with her up the street till she reached her home.

They would not have had Aunt Bessie put to shame by the visitors for many golden sovereigns. She embodied one little life-tragedy amongst them,

of which they had plenty more in their hearts: but she was a walking memorial of a kindred sorrow; her weakness had become to them something almost sacred.

Minnie Fletcher was sitting at the tea-table when she entered.

"One more day gone, and he hasn't come!" said the poor bride with quivering lip.

Minnie kissed her hand, and, touching her forehead, said—

"How hot your head is to-day. Has there been a boat ashore?"

"Yes—another boat; and he——" But she burst into a passion of sobs.

"There, there, darling! do try to cry; your tears will relieve your head. Take off your bonnet—so. Now let me pour you out a cup of tea."

Aunt Bessie grew calmer, sipped her tea in silence, till she put out her hand, and said—

"Minnie, never marry a man who lives by the sea; it's the cruelest of all God's creatures."

CHAPTER VII.

JEAN FORBES HAS VISITORS.

JEAN was setting the tea-things on the table a day or two after the disappointment of Aunt Bessie; the dresser was full of cartridges, which she had been refilling; there was also a stuffed owl being set up by her nimble hands, and, at the same time, she had been giving an occasional stir to some savoury pottage that was simmering on a large black pot upon the fire.

"May we come in, Miss Forbes?" said a clear-voiced girl at the door.

"Oh, Minnie Fletcher—that's right, come in and have a dish of tea. Ah, and Aunt Bessie too! Very glad to see you both, neighbours. Come, sit you down. It's getting chilly now, isn't it?"

"It's always a pleasure to come here," said Minnie; "things look so clean and nice, and there's such a lot of queer animals and things to look at. What have you done with the stuffed weasel that was running after the rabbit?"

"A gentleman at the Hall has bought it. I'm doing an owl now. It's not finished yet; he is going to pounce upon a poor little mouse when I've

time to attend to him. Well, Aunt Bessie, and how do you keep?"

"Pretty fair, in spite of great disappointments, thank you."

"Ah, I've heard of your wonderful patience! I'm sure, if I were in your place, Aunt Bessie, I should have given him up long ago."

"No, you wouldn't," said the other, fixing her great black eyes upon Jean; "not if you saw the visions I see o' times—aye, and hear his voice, I do, in the night time, as clear as a bell."

"Do you really, now? And you still think he is alive?"

It was useless for Minnie to make signs to Jean to drop the subject. Jean was cutting and buttering the bread all the time, and took no notice of Minnie.

"I know he is alive—I know it because he talks to me. Poor Harry—a long time it is since our wedding-day. But he tells me to keep tea ready for him; and I do, don't I, Minnie?"

"Yes, aunt; but you will make your head ache if you talk so much, dear."

"Ah, for headache there is nothing so good as the slough of a last year's snake. Here's a capital one that Angus unravelled out of the grass himself. Don't be frightened at it; the skin of a snake set in your hat—like this—is a certain cure."

"If Angus found it, I think Minnie ought to wear it," said Aunt Bessie, with a sly look at Jean.

"Yes," said Jean; "he would be so happy if you would take it."

"I don't think I ought to have it, Jean; things like that may do mischief—I mean, I shouldn't like your brother to think I was encouraging him. I've not made up my mind at all."

"I'm sorry to hear you say that, Minnie. My brother worships the ground you tread on, and I hoped you knew what a good fellow he is. Good heart is better than fair face."

"So it is," said Aunt Bessie, "and (as I say to Minnie) marry a man whose feet are fast on the land; it's weary work watching those cruel, crawling waves. But Minnie is that headstrong!"

"I can't be driven into marrying a man—let him be ever so respectable," said Minnie, tossing her head rather defiantly.

"Of course not," said Jean; "you want to choose for yourself; and everybody knows best what they choose a man for. It isn't everybody who cares to have for husband a quiet, hard-working young man like my brother—there's tastes and there's tastes."

Jean could toss her head, too, when her family honour was at stake. After this bit of fencing, there was a long silence, only broken by the prolonged sipping of hot tea.

"You've got a nice home here," said Aunt Bessie, looking at the pretty stone window-settings and the good oak beams. "In the winter-time one might keep one's self here as warm as a dormouse."

"Yes," said Jean, "and I'm sure it's a nice position to be with so kind a gentleman as Squire Hervey; he treats all his men as if they were men like himself."

"'Tis a pity he's got to die one day," said Minnie. "If I were you, I should be always in a quake for fear that young Snarler should come into the property. Now, down at our place, we most of us have our own houses, and nobody can turn us out."

"'Deed? and 'tis a hard life you have sometimes, Minnie Fletcher."

"Aye, fishing is not what it was years ago; those Yarmouth smacks and the big Grimsby vessels —steam, some of 'em—make a difference to us. Yet

we make a tidy harvest in the summer with letting lodgings."

"Yes, as soon as you begin to sacrifice your independence," said Jean, maliciously, "you make some money; but when you are stuck up with pride and independence you starve."

"You ought to be a lawyer, Jean, your tongue is so ready," said Minnie, laughing; "but I don't blame you for standing up for your own brother."

Just then the door was opened, and little Willie came in slowly.

"Bless the boy! what's he been doing?" said Jean, seeing his swollen eyes.

"I've been bea—beaten with a stick," sobbed the lad.

"Eh! and who has dared to lay a finger on you, Willie?"

"Mister Aubrey licked me for—for frightening up some birds."

"But why did you fright them? You ought not to have got in the way."

"But he—he—he—he told me to go across the stubble; and I did my best, I'm sure. Take care; that arm's bad, Jean."

"Why, your fingers are all bleeding, my dear."

"Don't touch me; I'm aching all over. He wanted to give me half a crown, when the other gentlemen cried 'Shame' on him; but I flung it in the dirt."

Jean kissed him, saying, "My poor, wee bairn!"

Minnie Fletcher said, "Well done, brave Scotland! What's bred in the bone comes out, you see, when it's wanted."

Jean with some trouble stripped the boy to his waist, and all three women exclaimed aloud when they saw the huge blue marks across his shoulders and little arm.

As Jean and Minnie busied themselves with bathing the child, Aunt Bessie sat silent in her chair, rocking herself nervously to and fro. At length she said—

"The little lad looks sadly; put him to bed, Jean Forbes, and I will go up to the Hall and demand justice."

"No, no, aunt," said Minnie, in a firm voice; "it's no business of ours, and you might lose Mr. Forbes his place. God knows my heart is stirred at the sight of the little lad, and I would gladly go with you if we could do any good."

"I think you had better leave it to my brother, Aunt Bessie," said Jean.

Hardly was Willie got into bed, when some one tapped at the door. Two young gentlemen entered, one of them being the Lord Haverden who had visited the village club.

"Has your son returned, Mrs. Forbes?" he asked.

"My little brother, sir, you mean," said Jean, offering chairs.

As Minnie and Aunt Bessie rose to leave, Lord Haverden said—

"Pray don't move; we have only come in for a minute to see if the poor little fellow reached home all right. I'm afraid he has been cruelly punished?"

"He has been sorely bruised, sir," replied Jean, "and I should be much obliged if you would step this way and see for yourself. I don't know if there be any bones broken."

The two gentlemen followed Jean into the bedroom.

The two women remained in the front room; after a few minutes they heard one of the gentlemen say—

"Well, Willie, old chap, if that had been done at my school, do you know what Mr. Aubrey would have got?"

"No sir," said Willie, in a weak voice.

"Why, he would have had a monitor's whopping; that means, twelve of the biggest fellows in the school would have given him a cut with their cane. Well, as we are guests at the Hall, we could not do that, but we let him know that he was a beastly coward, didn't we, Haverden?"

"We did," replied the other, rather absently; and then, when his friend was coming out of the bedroom, he stooped over the boy, and said—

"I've got such a jolly knife for you—six blades, and I don't know what else besides. Would you like to have it, Willie?"

"Oh, sir, thank you; what a beauty! Jeannie, come and see what the gentleman has given me."

After the knife had been well admired by all, Lord Haverden held out in his hand a card, saying—

"Miss Forbes, I know all about your brother and poor father, and if ever you should be in want of a friend, just write to me, at that address, and, if I'm alive, I will not be found wanting."

"Thank you, sir," said Jean, blushing and dropping a graceful curtsey; then giving another look at the card, she hastily corrected herself, "Thank you very much, my lord, for your kindness; and you, too, sir. Good night, gentlemen."

The three women examined the card and the address with much interest and some mirth.

"It's another loss of independence," said Jean, laughing. "I'll go and tell Willie who it was that gave him the knife."

Presently she returned with her finger to her lip.

"Hark! he sleeps already; you can hear the poor bairnie sobbing in his sleep."

Quietly the two callers said "Good-bye," and quitted the keeper's lodge.

CHAPTER VIII.

SOME CONSEQUENCES.

IT was about an hour later that Jean heard her brother come in at the wicket gate and put the dogs in their kennel. Then, she could hear him give them their supper, and help the beaters and carriers to hang up the game in the safe at the back of the lodge.

Presently she heard him bid them "Good night," and began to dish up his supper. It was dark outside, but the wood fire cast a ruddy, comfortable glow on all within.

"So here you are at last, Angus! You're very late the night."

"Rather late. Where's Willie?"

"In bed, poor lad; tell me about it as soon as you've got your boots off, and washed your hands."

Angus stole to the boy's bedside and watched him for some time; when he returned to his supper, Jean was sitting by the table, doing her knitting. She began by explaining how Willie came home, and how Lord Haverden and his friend called to ask how her brother was, and how kind they both

had been. She did not allude to the card, though she had put it carefully away in her writing-desk.

"Well, Jeannie," said Angus, as he helped himself again, "I never felt more like knocking a man down than I did when I saw Willie yonder being thrashed by that bully. There was no reason for it, neither. Mr. Aubrey himself had ordered Willie to run across a corner of the field to tell some of the beaters to move up; and on his way he roused a covey of birds too far off to shoot at. When Willie came back to us, Mr. Aubrey seized him by the collar, and shook him till he was red in the face, calling him a little fool for going through the stubble; and when Willie replied, 'You told me to!' then young master took up a stick, and let into him with all his might, and said, 'I'll teach you manners, you little devil!'"

"I promise you, Jean, it was only by thinking of what would become of you if I struck him, that I managed to restrain my anger. Luckily that plucky Lord Haverden and Mr. Crosby came running up; and his lordship seized the stick, crying, 'For shame! Are you mad, Hervey?' Well, then you should have seen young master's face; his eyes were like red-hot coal: but his young lordship stood up to him—he's only a boy at school, they tell me,—and he folded his arms across his chest, and said, 'Strike me, you coward, if you like; but if you touch that little boy again, I'll let you see what the champion light-weight at Harrow can do.' But young master saw he had met his match, and muttering, 'Don't be a fool, Haverden!' strode off.

"I went to Willie, and felt him to see if there were any bones broken, and then I told one of the beaters to see him home. By the time we had walked the stubble, Lord Haverden and his friend

said to me, 'We've had enough of this, Forbes; tell Mr. Aubrey that we have gone home, will you?' The other gentlemen knew nothing of what had happened, and so we kept on all right. But as we were coming home up the street, you know, past the club, there was a pretty tidy lot of folk standing about. Well, I couldn't say for certain who they were, because it was beginning to get very dusky, but there was a good few boys amongst them, and some of them began calling out, 'Has he killed Willie, Angus?' and some hissed. You may guess it was not very pleasant for me, hearing my name brought into it like that. 'What's all this about, Forbes?' one or two of the gentlemen said to me; but I shrugged my shoulders, and pretended not to know. Well, it's the worst thing that ever could have happened for us."

"Minnie Fletcher and her aunt were up here when Willie came home. I dare say they went and told it in the village."

"Minnie been here? Why didn't you say so afore?"

"There were other things more important to speak about."

"That's all you know about it, then, Jean. I'm quite fond and foolish about that girl. And she's been up to see me?"

"No; she's been to see me, silly. I wouldn't think too much about her; she doesn't seem to know her own mind yet at all. There's a cousin of hers been after her ever so long."

"Did she say anything about him—or me?"

"No; I think not. I don't know that I quite like her, Angus. She's got that defiant air that all the fisher-folk have. She seems to hold to her own people as much as the rest of them. That poor widow that they call 'Aunt Bessie' came

with her, and almost scared me with her large, black eyes; but there's a sadness in them that wins your love. I often think Minnie will look like her when she's a bit older."

"Not yet, I hope; that Aunt Bessie has as haggard a face as a witch. I'm sure she sees more than other human creatures can."

"So she says: she tells me she can both see and hear her husband in the dead of night; and when she tells you anything, you're bound to believe it, she looks so like a Jezebel—no, I mean a Deborah."

"Do you think Minnie would make a man a good wife, Jean?"

"Well, yes, I do; else I shouldn't have cracked you up to her face, as I did this evening. She'd stick to you through thick and thin; but if the young master was Squire, and he began hectoring about, she would lose you your place by her free manners."

"Don't you think that defiant air, as you call it, is the result of her independent position? If she was my wife, and felt that a free tongue would ruin us, she would learn to curb it."

"But she sees all that, and thinks she is lowering herself by getting into such a position."

Angus remained thoughtful for some time before he said—

"Dear father used to say, 'If ever you get out of your place, and can't get one to suit you, go off to New Zealand, or Canada, or Australia. There's money in the bank to take you to the end of the world. You're a Scotchman,' he used to say, 'and your breed always does well in the colonies.' I've been thinking, ever since young master struck Willie, that if the Squire died we would emigrate and seek independence in a new country."

"Should I hint that to Minnie next time I see her?"

"Yes, you might see how she takes to the idea, Jean. By-the-by, have you heard lately from your young man?"

Jean dropped her head as she replied, "No; he writes seldom, and is always full of grumbles. I think I must give him up. When you marry, I can go into service."

"No, you won't, my lass. If Minnie, or whoever it is, grudges you a room here, then Angus Forbes remains unmarried."

Jean smiled, and shook her head. "I like to hear you say that; it sounds bonny on your lips: but I know men better than that; they mean well, poor things, but when the fire of temptation comes, they're as weak as this wool;" with which words Jean passed her wool through the candle with disastrous effects.

Angus lit his pipe, and became absorbed in thought. Jean was busy now with her owl, asking her brother's advice at times on some knotty point of pose: and so an hour or more went by. Then came an elaborate knock at the door, and the grave face of Mr. Brook, the Squire's butler, appeared.

"I hope I see you well, Miss Forbes—and the little man?"

"He is asleep, thank you, Mr. Brook, and seems easier."

"Ah! we have had terrible scenes about it at the Hall. I could hear the Squire pitching into Master Aubrey before dinner. I hate listening, you know, but really their voices got so loud, and Master Aubrey's was so nasty and rude, that I put my head in—

"'Did you call, sir?' says I, as smooth as melted butter.

"'Confound you, Brook, get out!' says Master Aubrey.

"'I am not your servant, sir,' says I, keeping my dignity.

"'Did you call, sir?' I says again to my master.

"'Well, Brook,' says the Squire, 'I shall be glad if you can take a note for me to the keeper's lodge after dinner, and ask how the little boy is getting on. I want you to take it yourself.'

"'Certainly, sir,' and I slowly left the smoking-room, fixing Master Aubrey with a stony stare of—well, say a stony stare."

"Poor master!" murmured Angus.

The butler went on, "As soon as I had left the room, Mr. Aubrey began again at his father quite awful. The pantry, you know, is just along the corridor, and it was all I could do to keep myself from hearing every word that was spoken. He called his father a dotage, whatever that may mean, and said he didn't behave to him properly as a father should, and he was always taking the part of the villagers against him, and he shouldn't stand any more of it; he should go away and live in London. Then came a low murmur, so low that I thought it better to be at hand in case aught should happen to the master—for there's no knowing what violence that young man might employ,—and there was the poor old gentleman pleading with his son not to disgrace the old name. He said something—I did not rightly hear what—about, 'If your poor mother had been alive'—and then what do you think was the heartless answer? Why, he said, 'Bosh!' You hardly believe me, Miss Forbes, but he cried, 'Bosh!' and stamped his foot. It nearly made me fall backwards—the door opened so sudden, and Mr. Aubrey called out—

"'Brook!'

"'I'm coming, sir,' says I, recovering myself as well as I could.

"'What, are you listening at the door, eh?' says he, sarcastic.

"'There's no occasion, sir,' says I, 'you shouts so loud.'

"'If you don't behave yourself, I'll treat you as I treated the keeper's boy to-day,' says he, looking very nasty.

"I had a nice answer on my lips for him, but when I see the old Squire looking so woebegone it quite unmanned me.

"'Brook,' says Mr. Aubrey, 'tell John to pack up my things. I shall go away by the first train to-morrow.'

"'Certainly, sir,' says I, making way for him to pass. Then I went up to the Squire, and said, 'I'm very sorry to see Mr. Aubrey so put out, but I expect it was the boys hissing him in the village. He'll be better to-morrow, sir, I'll be bound.'

"'Brook,' says master, 'you never had a son; you don't know what it is I am suffering—and you may thank God you don't.'

"'About the keeper, sir?' says I, after as decent a pause as I could give him, considering the silver was not yet put out on the table.

"'Ah, yes; come in for the letter again. I'll have it ready in five minutes; and tell the coachman to get the dog-cart ready at eight o'clock to-morrow morning.'

"The old gentleman's lip was set firm. He could not get over Mr. Aubrey saying 'Bosh!' when he reminded him of his dead mother; I know that was what made him so resolute. It meant, 'Out you go, my lad, till I'm dead,'—that's about it."

"It is very terrible for the poor old gentleman,"

said Jean; "but it's an ill wind that blows *nobody* any good; and I think the village-folk won't miss him much."

"We was not very merry at dinner, I can tell you: my master hardly ate a morsel, couldn't do anything but sigh; the gentlemen kept looking at one another, and I had some ado to keep their glasses full. You see, they felt a bit nervous-like, and had nothing particular to do, so kept on sipping the sherry without quite knowing what they was doing. I've known gentlemen do that quite absent-minded, and then say, 'Brook, what has become of the sherry?' —it's a fact, miss."

The butler's face actually had the ghost of a smile upon it: as a rule, his eminent respectability did not allow of anything so frivolous. Angus waited till the smile had worked itself out, and then inquired if he had brought him the promised note.

"Bless my soul! if I had not clean forgotten it," said Mr. Brook, clapping himself all over smartly, to discover in which pocket the epistle was lying concealed. "Ah! here it is, with my own private memorandums," he cried, as several small pieces of dirty paper fell out with its appearance. "Read it, read it at your leisure, while I look at this 'ere howl."

When Angus had read the letter, he passed it on to his sister. Mr. Brook, while pretending to admire the owl, was pricking up his ears for any scrap of information which might come in his way; he was very curious to know what was in the letter. As Angus did not seem to be going to acquaint him with the contents, he threw out a bait inquiringly.

"Well? am I to take back a verbal answer?"

"I don't think that would be very civil, Mr. Brook," said Angus. "You know, perhaps, what this letter says?"

Mr. Brook pursed up his lips and simpered, trying to look knowing and yet guileless; this quite took in the simple keeper.

"Then there's no harm in my telling you that master very kindly asks me to take the post of head keeper."

"I thought so," said the butler; "and I congratulate you with all my heart, and wish you joy."

"Thank you! thank you, Mr. Brook!" said Angus and his sister.

"Well, if you're going to write a hanswer, I must be saying good night; there'll be whisky and soda wanted by I get back."

So Mr. Brook made a dignified and polished exit.

"Well, Jean, it has come; and I guess poor Willie's flogging hastened the Squire's intentions. We must look after the poor lad a little better, and not let him run about so wild. Doesn't it seem to you as if we were robbing poor father of something—getting into his shoes so quick?"

"Ah, brother, when you are away all day, I am constantly thinking of father and dear mother. There's one thing—if you don't step into father's shoes, somebody else will."

"You're right, lassie. Get me down the poems of Robbie Burns; father aye loved to read them. Before we go to bed, Jean, I will read you a bit he marked after mother died."

And Angus read in a voice so loud and clear that the fox terrier in her kennel cocked one ear forward and listened—

> "'The voice of nature loudly cries,
> And many a message from the skies,
> That something in us never dies;
> That on this frail, uncertain state
> Hang matters of eternal weight;

That future life, in worlds unknown,
Must take its hue from this alone:
Whether as heavenly glory bright,
Or dark as misery's woeful night.'

"I think, Jean, we can thank God now, and get us to bed."

CHAPTER IX.

THE VICAR.

THE Vicar and one of his daughters were making some calls in the parish a few days after Willie's ill-treatment. It was getting to the end of September now, and the leaves were turning in the woods. The Squire's shooting party had broken up suddenly after the hasty disappearance of his son. There were fewer carriages full of visitors now rolling about the villages, and the natives were being left to themselves and to their quiet, humdrum life. The Rev. C. Fraser began to enjoy himself now, and would take long walks with one daughter or another, sometimes going across the fields to the sea, and so along the crisp turf of the undulating cliff, or throwing pebbles into the retreating wave for the big black retriever to fetch out. Sometimes he had a cottage to visit on the other side of the moor, and then they would return with sprigs of pink heather in their hats ; or their way lay through the dark woods redolent with turpentine, and then they would amuse themselves by watching the gambols of the rabbits, standing silent for a long

while till the foolish young rabbits thought they were only trees of a different growth, and heeded them not.

Mr. Fraser was bent on having a co-operative store in the village, of which all the villagers should be members; he had just heard from the Squire that two cottages near the club could be had for the purpose, and he was this afternoon going round to broach the subject to some of his parishioners.

There was no chapel at Beckthorp, and if any one yearned after a more free and easy service than he could get at the parish church, he had to go down to the sea, where the fisher-folk had built for themselves a large red-brick building, not so much because of any difference of doctrine, as for freedom's sake: they wanted a place which they might call their own; they wanted to choose their own hymns and their own minister; and they wanted to be able to "sack" the minister of their choice, if they thought fit. But they were quite willing to come to church on occasions, to be married and buried according to the ritual of the Church of England. They were very good friends with the Vicar.

Miss Fraser was a merry, round-faced girl of about nineteen. She had several sisters equally merry and round-faced, and only by their height could you tell one from the other.

Mary Fraser and her father had just tapped at Harry Bent's door; the Vicar, as was his wont, opened the door and went in, but found, to his surprise, that Harry and Giles Fletcher were seated at the table, enjoying apparently a good dinner.

"I beg your pardon, Harry; I did not know you dined at four o'clock, or I would not have intruded. Bless me, what very fine blackbirds you've got there on the table!"

"Yes, sir, they be wonderful fine for the time of year," replied Mr. Bent, covering his confusion in a mug of ale. But seeing that the Vicar was laughing, he joined in the laugh, and said, "You must wink a little bit, sir, and consider these here birds are raised in our own back-yard, if you please."

"Quite so," said the Vicar, "I know you are old at this game, Harry, and it seems part and parcel of your nature; our good Squire winks at it, too: but what is Giles doing with blackbirds? I thought he had given a promise to a certain person never to go out after the Squire's birds again?"

"So I have, sir; though I don't see how you came to know about it. But I am not out after 'em now, am I, sir?"

"Ah, Giles, you are young, and have had a better bringing up than Harry; there will be no excuse made for you, I warn you. I shall, of course, say nothing of to-day's feast, but you can't expect to go on and not get found out. You know the proverb, 'Murder will out;' and this is true, if it be only the murder of hares and partridges. Harry, I will call again."

As they walked up the street, May said to her father—

"I don't like the look of Giles Fletcher; he has a handsome face, but his eyes look sly. When you first went in, I saw through the crack in the door how defiant he looked; and then, when you spoke of his being found out, he turned quite white."

"Yes, Mary, I'am afraid he is on a dangerous road. He consorts with bad company, and cannot bear to be rebuked."

"What a pity that the girl, Minnie Fletcher, seems to prefer him to Angus Forbes. Angus is worth a hundred of such as Giles is."

"Oh! is Angus spoony in that quarter? I always thought he would never stoop to such a frailty as love. Poor Angus! when your steady, blunt, downright man of action, and not of words, does fall in love, it is often a more serious affair. I must have a talk with Minnie next time I get an opportunity. Here, I am going in now to do some work; couldn't you run up the hill and call at the lodge, and find out if Angus is ill? He was not singing in the choir, last night. Yet he never misses church."

So Mary tripped up to the keeper's lodge.

Forbes and his sister were both at home, engaged in some work at the side table.

"I hope I am not disturbing you both?"

"Not at all, Miss Mary; pray be seated," said Jean.

"Papa and I have been round, asking people if they would take shares in the new stores we are wishing to start."

Angus turned from his work, saying, "Anything that the Vicar does must be right, and perhaps he has thought about what will become of the shopkeeper."

"Oh yes; we have promised to give them some shares in the stores. There are not many, you know; in fact, only one real shop at the post-office, where they sell everything you don't want, and never have what you do."

"Quite right, Miss Mary," said Jean, laughing; "and things are so dear, too. It would be nice having a good store."

"And yet several mothers that we have seen fight shy of it. I believe they think we are going to make something out of it. We had such trouble making folks understand that they would get their things cheaper and better. Tea, for instance, which they pay two shillings a pound for now, they will

get for one shilling and fourpence; cheese, for which they pay ninepence and tenpence, will cost sixpence. And at the end of the year those who have bought shares will get some money back—according to the profits."

"Only think!" said Jean, her Scotch thrift approving of money that has been spent coming back like an Australian boomerang.

"I do not yet quite see who's going to be rich enough to buy shares?" said Angus, hesitatingly.

"Papa says folk must begin and save up for them."

"It's none so easy to save on twelve or even fifteen shillings a week, miss, with a large family to keep. Think of the clothes and the boots and the food, and sometimes the doctor's bill."

"Yes; it's very hard, I know."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Mary,—the only way really to know is to suffer want yourself."

"And we have done it," said Mary, colouring a little. "Why, before we came here we had a living in Essex; it ought to have been a good living. But you know what farming has come to down there. There was no tithe to be had; we had very, very little to live on. I shall never forget those days of cold and hunger. Poor mother caught an illness which clings to her still. But we happily got this given us, and we soon became so fat and chubby that no one would guess we only had meat once a week in our young days. I very much doubt if your brother, Jean, has ever known what it is to suffer want."

Mary Fraser's comic imitation of the slightly Scotch accent of the young keeper made them both laugh. Angus replied—

"I beg your pardon, Miss Fraser, for saying you had not suffered want. I think I might be excused

for saying so. I can only say I respect you all the more for your experience, and for the brave manner in which you speak freely of it. Some ladies would have been ashamed to mention it."

"By the way, Jean, why was not your brother singing bass last night in church? He is so seldom absent."

Jean looked at Angus, and smiled.

Angus coughed; yes, it was rather a bad cough, for him. At last he stammered out, with a red face—

"I—I—I had never heard the Primitive Methodists sing in their own chapel, and so just for once, you know——"

"Was she there?" asked Mary, suddenly.

"She? who is she? Do you mean——?" The poor fellow reddened to the roots of his hair, and looked at Jean for help.

"Yes, Miss Mary," said Jean, laughing; "I think you have about guessed the attraction that took Angus to chapel."

"Then it was only the attraction of Minnie's bright eyes, Mr. Forbes?"

"Well, yes; perhaps, if I speak the whole truth, I must confess that I wanted to hear Minnie Fletcher—she's a fine singer."

"So I have heard; she is a fine girl, too, and father says a good girl, and would make a man a good wife. But she's like most of us, Jean,—she's very wilful. I'll tell you what! if you want to marry Minnie Fletcher, you must neglect her a little; don't make so much of her: and, Jean, you might talk to her of inviting down one of your lowland lassies for your brother to fall in love with. I shouldn't wonder if that would touch her."

"Well, I never thought of that, Miss Mary," said Angus, laughing.

"Ah, I see I must give you some lessons in this sort of trapping, Mr. Keeper. But, seriously, I do want you to win her. But I must be off. Good bye."

"What a blithe, merry lass she is," said Angus, watching her as she crossed the brook. "I wonder if there's anything in it."

"I will try her receipt," said Jean; "but now to work again."

CHAPTER X.

A PENNY READING.

THE autumn had passed away into winter; the trees and hedges were now in the grasp of the north wind, and very savagely did he blow across the frozen moor from his icy throne in Arctic regions beyond the sea. In summer-time it was a matter of boast with the natives that, when you gazed seaward, you looked at an expanse of water which stretched right away to the Pole,—pure ocean undiluted by any fresh water from island or continent; but in the howling months of January and February they said little about their prized North Pole, but were glad enough to squeeze together in the ingle neuk, and listen to the old stories before the fire. Even the club was not always full o' winter nights, unless some special attraction, such as a penny reading, or a concert, called them out. There is one going on to-night. Let us enter and enjoy the simple amusements of the hour.

The back rows are full of boys and girls. The boys are—well, I think they must have got the mumps, so strangely do their cheeks bulge out. No,

I see they are busy on buns; buns are cheap, to-night—a mere drug in the market, as the chemist from Danby said. He had come to Beckthorp on a visit, and had imparted some very useful information to the drug department of the new store next door; which information the store committee were not going to utilize. "If you get your drugs from Danby, you will save ten per cent." Quite so! They bowed him out with a ticket for the entertainment. And here he was looking around rather superciliously till he came to the front seats, when he became all smiles and nods.

The boys, then, in the back seats, being so clogged with bunny matter, could hardly utter anything more intelligible than "Where's Bill?" "Under the bench—bun's got dropped." "Oh! is this 'ere it? here's something soft under my foot." "Drat you! that's my bad corn, that is." Whereas the girls were all simpering and tittering, and tattling into one another's bonnet-strings: "Do ye see Mister Forbes?" "He's gone behind the stage to see what Giles Fletcher is a doin'." "Look at Miss Brown; did ye ever see such a back hair as that?" "Lor', Susie, she's got her false front put on behind, I do declare!" "Hush! here comes the Squire; we couldn't hear his carriage for the snow." "How worn he do look, to be sure!" "Who's the tall young gentleman with the lady?" "Don't you know? that's the Cappen—he's come home from forren parts." "Who's the young lady? Ask Mary Bush: she's been helping in the Squire's kitchen. I say, Mary, who's yon?"

Mary Bush blushes on being appealed to by a whole benchful, and changes her seat in order to form a centre of information.

"Who's yon with the Cappen—the lady with the white cloak?"

"She's a tip-topper—Honourable Miss Gladys—I don't know what else—a regular 'eap of names. Look! there's her brother."

"Why, Jemima, blessed if that ain't that blooming Lord Haver—Haver—something, what behaved hisself so nice last summer!"

"So it is, Lizzie; and to think he should have a sister!"

"And why shouldn't he, stoopid?"

"Please don't take me up so smart, Jenny Crofton; I was a-going to say 'a sister with a white shawl and real diamonds,'—so now!"

But we must not stop all the evening listening to the young girls. A seat or two further on there are some old men in smock-frocks—quite unfashionable villagers; they have each got their old women with them, dressed in black gowns and bonnets. The old men are showing the gaps in their front teeth, and preparing to be amused at everything they see; for they can't expect to hear much at their age. The old women have got six camphor drops, which they are lending along the row. "It'll keep the cowd out, Sarey, if you'll press it to your gums for half a minute. Don't go eating of them, 'cause they be a very special lot, three ha'pence the half ounce. No, it won't melt yet awhile."

"How do you do, Mrs. Jones? Didn't think to see you here with your rheumatis. Will you try the camphor drop? Sarey, where's that there paper? If you've eaten them, I shall never hear the last of it. Ah! here it is again."

The next two rows are full of fisher-folk from Nether Beckthorp.

"And is he going to get Mr. Thomson to build him a house? Is he indeed!"

"Yes, he'll borrow half, and half he's made by his boat."

"It's my opinion that them summer lodgers pay better than fishing."

"They do; why didn't our father think on that years ago?"

"Why, you silly, there was no train came near us then."

"No more there was. I am thronged with lobster, and can't think."

"I say, Ruth Fletcher, is Giles going to marry Minnie?"

"I think so; his mother's been buying a new bed and a basin and a jug. They'll have to join at one, I reckon; the old woman's that saving—she is."

"It's well being Minnie, and having first choice," sighed a young girl whose nose had forgotten to sprout when the rest of her was growing.

And now we come to the front seats, we must not be so rude as to listen to their comments. The third row were all the servants from the Hall, and as they sat so near to their master they were as quiet as mice until the applause began, when they thawed and melted, and became a volcano of eruptive encores. Jean Forbes sat next to Mr. Brook and the head gardener, and whenever she made a remark the butler waved his hand gracefully (he was wearing a ring), and said—

"We shall see by-and-by, Miss Jean."

In the front row sat the Squire and his second son, Captain Hervey, just returned from India; then Lord Haverden and a married daughter of the Squire's, and the Hon. Miss Gladys, and the Vicar with three of his daughters.

There were several well-known characters bustling about the stage—Angus, Giles, Minnie, the Vicar's two eldest girls, Harry Bent, the Post-master, and other members of the church and chapel choirs, most of whom were just in that state of nervous

excitement that they could not keep still a moment, and if they set off to do anything they remembered something else which must be done first. The consequence of all this was that they were constantly doubling back, like hares hard pressed, and falling into one another's arms. As there was a small door at each end of the stage which led to the behind-scenes, the hare no sooner disappeared at one door but it re-appeared at the other. Now, when Angus met Miss Fraser and nearly knocked her over, they both laughed, and Angus blushed and begged pardon. Also, when Harry Bent ran tilt into Minnie's stomacher, he was profuse in his apologies to the wayward beauty; but when Angus, turning suddenly to do an errand for Miss Lucy Fraser, fairly knocked the unfortunate Giles over as he was stooping to pick up some music, and himself sprawled over his prostrate rival, the whole assembly burst into a roar of laughter, and the little boys and girls at the back jumped upon their seats, shouting, "Hurrah! go it, Angus!" When the noise had subsided, the husky voice of Giles was heard grumbling as he wiped himself down with a coloured pocket-handkerchief.

"Great lout of a rustic!" were the words plainly heard by the four front benches.

Angus at first looked a little perplexed, but, catching a hint from the Vicar, he stepped up to Giles, and politely offered to help him in dusting his coat.

This he proceeded to do with some vigour, to the great glee of the school children, who shouted, "Tie a knot in the hankey! tie a knot, and give it 'ot!" At length Giles Fletcher was fairly dusted off the stage in high dudgeon.

Presently the Squire tapped on the floor with his stick, and Minnie, Miss Mary Fraser, Angus and

Giles came upon the platform with music fluttering in their hands; they looked at one another inquiringly once or twice.

"What's up now?" shouted a rude boy at the back.

"Trying to take the time from Minnie, don't yer see?"

"Time? what time? Where's her watch, mate?"

"Silence in the back rows!" said the keeper of the club, in a stentorian voice, just as the quartet began.

"Hush, hush! silence behind there!" said the people in front; and every row except the two last turned round with a rustle and a scrape to see what the hubbub was about.

Giles had recovered his temper now; in fact, he could hardly sing for laughing, and some of his notes became an inane gurgle.

Minnie glanced pretty sharply at him, but in vain; for Giles had just stepped into the Three Jolly-boats before coming up the street, and he was now a bit of a jolly-boat himself. He had so far let this out that the butler had nudged the head gardener behind Jean's back. This nudge had been passed on with whispered comments and winks in small print. Minnie's quick eye saw some of this, and she omitted the last verse.

The song was suddenly over, and everybody was stamping and yelling.

When the performers met behind the stage, Minnie said low to Giles—

"You've been drinking again! I shall not sing that duet with you now; and I should strongly advise you to go home."

Giles looked foolish, and said nothing.

"Oh, Minnie!" said Miss Mary, "why *did* you leave out the last verse?"

"Well, suppose they had encored us, it would have come in handy."

"We are not likely to get encored," said Angus, "if one of the parts is grinning at the girls t'other end of the room half the time."

"Who was grinning at girls?" said Giles, angrily.

"Hush, hush! silence behind the stage!"

The second thing was on. Harry Bent was reciting a piece.

He began in rather squeaky tones, but with plenty of dramatic power; but unfortunately the quarrel behind the stage had not finished, so that the recitation came to the listeners in the hall, especially to those at the back, in this form—

> "Sweet was the sound, when oft, at evening's close,
> Up yonder hill the village murmur rose."

"Who was grinning at girls?"

"You were; it was monstrous."

> "There as I passed with careless step and slow,
> The mingled notes——"

"It's no business of yours, Master Jackanapes. Who are you, I'd like to know?"

> "The sober herd that lowed to meet their young,
> The noisy geese that gabbled——"

"Well, drop it now; or they'll hear us in the hall."

> "And the loud laugh that spake the vacant mind;
> These all in sweet confusion——"

"Who are you? I suppose I may smile without getting a horder from the nearest magistrate! And as to grinning at girls, there isn't a blooming

one I'd care to touch with the end of a boat-hook. I loathe the whole lot."

> "All but yon widowed solitary thing,
> That feebly bends beside the plashy spring."

But at this point the whole assembly burst out into a guffaw, to Harry Bent's great surprise; for he had been so absorbed, entranced, and enthralled by Goldsmith's poetry, that he had taken no heed of the interruptions. He now, in his rage, thinking they were laughing at him, cried out—

"It comes from Goldsmith's 'Deserted Village,' ladies and gentlemen."

"Yes, yes, go on," whispered the Vicar, half rising from his seat; "we were laughing at something behind the stage."

"Go on," shouted a reckless ribald at the back, "be'st thou waiting for thy good woman?"

> "She, wretched matron, forced in age for bread
> To strip the brook with mantling cresses spread."

Another roar of laughter so incensed the cobbler that he flung the book on the ground with an angry stamp, and a withering look of scorn.

The third item on the programme was the toy symphony.

Great was the excitement when the Vicar was seen giving his arm to Miss Gladys, and when Lord Haverden and Captain Hervey also went on the stage.

"Ain't she beautiful to look at? Well, I never did! if she isn't undressing! Her arms is bare to the shoulder!"

"You silly—that's evening dress, that is."

"Only look at her jules, mate—di'monds in her hair and bracelets and a necklace of pebbles—they must have taken some finding! And what

are they going to do? Play summut? A toy simpenny they calls it? Oh, I see! the Cappen's got a penny whistle, and two bits of old iron; his lordship's going to tap three tumblers with an eggspoon, and Miss Gladys has a penny trumpet and a drum."

This, however, in spite of critical forecasts, was the gem of the evening, and was encored twice.

The last thing was a reading by the Vicar, which gave the old cronies the luxury of a good, if furtive, weep. But already the Squire's footman stood ready at the door. When the swells had gone, Minnie turned to Jean, and said—

"Do you think your brother would kindly walk home with me? I don't like to ask him, as he always seems to avoid me now somehow. You have Willie to keep you company, you know."

"But did not Giles Fletcher bring you here?"

"I would rather not walk back with him, Jean, please."

This was how it was that Angus found himself walking by the side of Minnie Fletcher over the crisp snow on this cold winter's night.

CHAPTER XI.

WALKING BY MOONLIGHT.

ANGUS and Minnie walked for some time in silence. He was thinking of the young lady's advice, "Treat her with some neglect," and he had a feeling that he would not take an advantage over his rival, though they do say that "all is fair in love and war." At last, after Minnie had nearly slipped to the ground on the ice, he offered his arm, and she accepted it.

"Well, we don't seem very full of talk, do we?" she said with a laugh.

"It is rather difficult for me, you see. I don't know how you feel with regard to me and Giles Fletcher."

"Oh! I did not mean that sort of talk, Angus, I should not have been so bold as that. I meant. you seem to be angry with me; you don't speak pleasant to me, as you used to do."

"It's your fault, then," said Angus, bluntly. "I used to think you cared a bit for me, now I find you like Giles better."

"Giles is my cousin, and you are—well, the Forbes are strangers in these parts."

"The same old story! One would think you Fletchers were a colony of rooks, by the way you talk and act."

"I don't understand that. How are we like rooks?"

"Have you not seen in the tall trees by the church how the rooks build their nests together? Well, if one of them goes and mates with a bird from another rookery, and tries to build her a nest among his own people, the other rooks drive them off with beak and claw, sometimes tearing down the half-made nest."

"I have never noticed that, Angus. Then the poor lovers may not mate at all, or what do they do?"

"Sometimes, Minnie, the old rooks will let the young couple build a nest in a tree a hundred yards off; and that, in time, becomes a new colony—a fresh rookery."

Minnie heard the last words in silence; if the Fletchers objected to her marrying Angus, why should she not do as the young, romantic rooks do, and take up a nest at a distance?

"Well, it's you that won't talk now," said Angus.

"I was busy, thinking about the rooks: they be wise creatures."

"Aye, faith, we may learn many a lesson from bird and beast. You don't know till you come to live among them."

"We talk of making a beast of one's self, Angus, but did you ever see a beast the worse for liquor?"

"Not unless a man had made it so. I guess what you are thinking on now. What made Giles come in like that?"

"I can't think. Suppose he felt nervous singing before ladies, and took something to give him Dutch courage."

"He must behave himself though when he speaks to me, or I shall let him know the weight of my fist. Wilt tell him so?"

"I don't want to see any quarrelling between you. If he comes to me, I shall tell him he has disgraced himself and me too."

"How many times are you going to let him disgrace you, Minnie?"

"I don't think you ought to ask me such a question."

"I'm sorry to have to. You keep us both on dangling about like ground bait. I think it's time now you made up your mind."

"Perhaps I have—and perhaps I haven't; anyways I am not going to be hurried into anything."

"Well, you must forgive my plain speaking. I'm just a Scotchman, and only know how to speak the truth to a body without any circum—— You know what I mean, Minnie."

"No, I don't. I suppose you want to give me some good advice?"

"I never give advice to a young woman; it isn't wise or decent. What I wanted to say was that we Scotch folk have our family pride, and—and—— Well, the long and the short of it is that if you're going on much longer with that good-for-nothing Giles Fletcher, Jean and I can't be on good terms with you as we were."

This was indeed a crushing blow to Minnie; she was struck dumb by the shock of it. And what made it all the worse, she felt that she had deserved it.

Giles's conduct at the club had indeed annoyed

her so much that she had invited Angus to see her home for the purpose of showing her resentment. She had thought herself rather kind and condescending to ask Angus, but here he was taking her to task like a school-girl, and almost throwing her off in his pride. She hardly knew how to take it; but she withdrew her arm from his, and walked on in silence till they turned a bend of the road, and the glimmer of the sea in the pale moonlight burst upon them.

"I think you are very unkind to me to-night, Angus Forbes."

"I hope not. I was thinking perhaps that you only wanted my company just to tease Giles a bit; and if that be so, as I said before, it goes against my northern feeling of self-respect. I don't think much of that cousin of yours, Minnie Fletcher. And it comes to this—if you think he's good enough for you, then I must keep right away from you, though it hurts me to do it."

"I think I understand you now, Angus. You fancy, doubtless, that I am a light-minded, fickle thing, that can't make up my mind; but you forget about those crows and their pecking the stranger. Perhaps I get pecked for liking a stranger. I think we oughtn't to judge one another too harsh; we don't know always what trials folk may have to bear at home."

"Is it so, indeed, Minnie?" said Angus, drawing her arm again into his, and pressing the hand he had seemed to scorn.

"Now, good night. Here's John standing at the door, waiting for me, and you had better go home, for it's late. Good night, and thank you for your company and—a deal o' good advice," she added, with a little short laugh that rang in his ears a long time.

"Thou art late, lass," said John, as she clapped the gate to. "Here's Giles here, complaining you were rude to him."

"Then don't believe a word he says; he has been drinking."

Giles heard these words, and stood scowling with his back to the fire, looking like a beautiful angel cast out of Paradise.

Minnie, as she entered, was struck by the beauty of his face; for the swift walk through the frosty air had coloured his cheeks with the most delicate tints: but anger burnt in his eyes and contracted his brow.

"Whoever says I have been drinking is a——"

"A what, Giles Fletcher? Let's hear, please; for I say so."

"Oh, well, if you say so, if course it must be so," said Giles, bitterly.

"Were you at the concert, John?" asked Minnie.

"No; I have been doing the chapel accounts with the deacons."

"It's a pity you weren't there to see the goings on. Giles couldn't sing his part for foolish giggling. I never was so mortified in my life. It's time I told him to go his own way."

"I was laughing at some one t'other end of the hall."

"Giles seems sober enough now, Minnie; I think you are rather hard on him. Sometimes one does get a spell of laughing at inconvenient moments. I did myself, a few Sundays back. I was holding the plate at the chapel door, and a great, beastly dog came and sat up in front of me, as if he was begging for pennies; and I tried all I could to keep it in, but, though I managed my face all right, the laugh was druv' down into my body like, and it shook me so

that all the little three-penny bits jumped up as if they was a laughing too."

John's genial narration dispelled somewhat the gloom which had been too conspicuous before.

Minnie took off her hat, and sat down.

"All I can say is, if I have mortified Minnie, I'm truly sorry. Jim at the Three Jolly-boats can tell you what I had—a mere nothing. Perhaps the frost drove it into my head, and made me mirthful-inclined. But, dear me! is a chap to be scolded and sent off for such trifles as that? I hope you found Mr. Forbes quite sober, and a nice, steady companion?"

"Now, Giles," said John, "don't you go a sneering at Angus Forbes. I've a very high opinion of him and his sister."

"I don't doubt he means well, and takes good care of his siller; all they Scotch do that sharp enough. But he needn't be so proud, setting hisself up above us fisher-folk."

"Is he proud? Not more so than an honest man may be," said John.

"They were talking in the town the other day that he had come into the Dolphin Inn, and said it was the only place where a man could get a glass of beer without being stared at by those beggarly fishermen—beggarly fishermen, that was it."

"Did he call us beggarly fishermen?" said John, bending forward with a frown.

"Who told you that tale, Giles?" asked Minnie.

"It's all over the town now; everybody's talking about it. They say his father would never have used such an expression."

"Well, if he said it, I think very badly of him. But we should not judge one another rashly; perhaps it's a lie," said Minnie.

"Beggarly fishermen!" repeated John Fletcher to himself. "If that isn't a good un! Why, all this Nether Beckthorp is freehold property, and belongs to us beggarly fishermen! And if the Squire was to die and Mister Aubrey was to come and turn out young Forbes, who would be the beggar then, I'd like to know! Beggarly fishermen indeed!"

"Well, good night, neighbours. I am keeping you up."

"I say, Minnie," said John, after Giles had left; "that young fellow's mother has been speaking to me about the wedding."

"What wedding? You don't mean she took it for granted I was a-going to marry Giles?"

"You needn't be so mettlesome about it, lass. She axed me if it was likely you was going to marry her Giles, that was all."

"Oh, very well; what did you say?"

"I said I didn't know, for you was like an unbroken filly, and Giles must tame you hisself."

"It's Giles that wants the taming; if he had been a good steady lad, I would have been glad to pleasure you all by marrying him. But I must think of myself a bit. What should I be like if Giles took to drinking and poaching?"

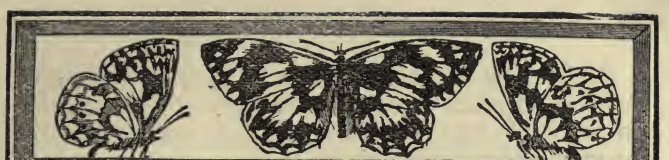
"Giles is young, and will sober down after a bit. You see, Minnie, if you marry him, we keep the money in the family. You've got a matter of eighty pounds laid up, and that will just pay off the mortgage on Giles's house; there's only him and his mother left, and if you marry him, the debt is wiped off and the house is yours, free of any charge on it. That's what I look at."

"It's all well enough looking at the money side of it; but the devil does that, John. I'd rather do what is right. There's no doubt that Angus

Forbes is the most God-fearing and honest of the two. He may not be so independent as Giles, but he has a strong arm and a willing mind, and, as you keep on saying, 'God helps them as helps themselves."

"Ah, well! it's no use talking to thee, lass; thou must go thine own froward way: so good night to thee."

So Minnie was more perplexed than ever. She was vexed with both the young men, and sought in vain for guidance in her difficulty. Aunt Bessie heard her tossing on her pillow, and cried, as if she were stilling an infant, "Hush, child! go to sleep—the angels are watching over us—there's nought to fear."



CHAPTER XII.

A SUNDAY WALK.

ON the next Sunday afternoon Aunt Bessie and Minnie were walking inland to get out of the cutting wind which blew over the sea. They had chosen a deep lane, sheltered by high banks and dark rustling woods. The wild, howling north wind was hushed about their ears, and only made itself audible in the swaying firs far above them. Half a mile further, an upland of brown heather dressed in festoons of snow stretched to their left, and here a cart-track frozen to unwonted cleanliness tempted them to leave the road and strike off towards the woods.

"Everything seems so tame to-day," said Aunt Bessie. "Look yonder! the little rabbits sit on their hind legs and almost wait for us to touch them; the red-breasts and the starlings look wistfully at us. They must be very hungry, poor things."

Minnie stopped and looked round.

"It's very pretty here in the winter-time, with the snow amongst the gorse and the heather; 'tis a pity rich folk can't come here at Christmas, and see how grand it all looks."

"Ah! they like to be warm in their own houses, Minnie. I often wonder where my husband is living in the cold season. No doubt he's gone to India or somewhere, where there is no post-office; but I have dreamt lately that he was coming soon, and I must get tea ready, as he said."

"Lor', Aunt Bessie, I wonder you aren't tired of that now. Don't you see everybody but you knows he's drowned at sea?"

"It's only me that knows he isn't drowned. Do you think the good Lord would send me such dreams, showing me him alive night after night, if he wasn't alive? Do you want to make the Lord out a liar? I'll never believe it, Minnie. In the last dream, I saw him sitting at our table yonder, really sipping the tea I have made so often, and all for naught. And I read on the packet—'twas a half-pound packet—'Ceylon tea.' So I want you to get me some good Ceylon tea: never mind the price—I can well afford it, you know, from the allowance his brother makes me out of the farm. Ceylon tea, it must be; if there isn't any to be got in the village, send to Norwich for it. How should I feel if he came back and I had no Ceylon tea?"

The wild, dark eyes glistened and looked into vacancy, seeing visions that saner eyes might not behold.

While Minnie and Aunt Bessie were taking their quiet Sabbath stroll over the heathery uplands, Master Giles Fletcher, with two of his chums, was engaged not very far off in shooting the Squire's hares and rabbits—on principle, mind!

Giles was none of your common poachers, who sold his game to the middleman, who conveyed it to the nearest market. Giles when he had made his little bag of partridges, hares, or wood-pigeon, used to call his neighbours and friends together

and give them a good spread, drinking the Squire's health in sound ale from the Three Jolly-boats. Perhaps it was on account of this that Angus Forbes could never get any one to give evidence against Giles. All he could elicit from the villagers was a sly, slow smile, and a declaration that Giles Fletcher was "a good-hearted un," and if half the parish behaved as handsome as he did, Beckthorp would be a better place to live in than it was.

Now, as Giles and his two comrades cracked away merrily right and left in the glades of the young larch wood, it chanced that Angus and his little brother were walking through the big fir-wood on the opposite hill. They had stopped in the bracken, and Angus, pointing to a certain spot at his feet, was saying, "Here it was, Willie, that poor father lay," and the two sons were standing in reverent, silent awe, when crack! crack! came the sounds of two gun-shots, seeming to them close at hand. The small boy, scared at the sounds, intruding as they did upon his reverie and vision of a murdered man, tightly clutched his brother's arm.

"There! what's that?"

"Only some chaps poaching yonder, Willie. I will run down and see if I can nab them. You cut across lower down, and mark who they are, if you catch sight of them."

So the two brothers separated, Angus taking to the right, that he might be on the upper ground, Willie running with his heart in his mouth along the line taken by Minnie Fletcher.

But Giles was too good a commander to be caught napping—he had a frigate out to spy and give warning, in the shape of Ned Cooper; and this gentleman, on seeing Angus emerge from the wood with his stout ash stick, speedily ran into the larches

and signalled danger. Immediately guns were stowed away under coats, and the three made off in Willie's direction. However, no sooner did they reach the outskirts of the wood than they spied Willie trotting along the cart-track.

Then they stopped and whispered together; in a moment Giles had given his gun to one of his companions, saying—

"I will go and hold the boy in talk; you make for the wood-stack and hide the guns. Go down yonder, behind the boy, get the other side of the hedge—it's pretty thick, and there's a high bank, and I'll keep him looking out t'other way."

With a nod they obeyed, and Giles crept along almost on all fours, covering himself by a hillock until he was within speaking distance of Willie, but behind him. He waited till his comrades on the lower ground had crossed the cart-track, then called out—

"Willie Forbes, is that you?"

Willie turned round and saw Giles walking demurely along the road—a pleasant, profitable, Sabbath walk, as it seemed.

"How do you do, boy? How are they all at home?"

"Very well, thank you," said Willie, timidly; "and I hope you keep pretty well."

"Capital, lad, capital! But what's your brother doing, out shooting on a Sunday. Wasn't that Angus I saw? And I heard a gun, too."

"Oh, we're out after poachers! It was the poacher's gun you must have heard, for Angus hasn't brought his out with him."

"Poachers, eh? then let us keep our eye on the wood yonder; for if they break cover, they're sure to try for this corner near the town-end. Where's Angus off to after them?"

"He said he would come down on them from the top, and I was to mark who came out."

"That's right, lad; let me see! Isn't that my two girls up yonder on the hill? I must catch them up, and you better go and meet your brother, and you can tell him nobody has come out this side of the wood, so he had better try upwards. You might say you saw me walking with two girls—there they be yonder, waiting for me,—and I can swear nobody ran past this way. Off with you! that'll help him amazing."

Thus Willie went to the larch plantation to rejoin his brother, while Giles Fletcher ran up the hill after two figures which he had seen in the distance, but whom he did not recognize until he had nearly reached them.

"Well, I am in luck," he said to himself; "if it isn't Aunt Bessie and Minnie! I shall look as respectable as possible if Forbes comes this way. Hi! Minnie, hold on a bit!"

They turned round on hearing Giles shout. He came up panting.

"You take a lot of catching. May I walk a bit of the way with you?"

"Of course you may, Giles," said Minnie.

"I thought it was better spending the afternoon quietly with you than fooling about with those chaps down yonder, so when I heard you had come up this way I set off after you."

Minnie rewarded him with one of her sweetest smiles; if she could but influence him to forsake his old companions, she felt she could willingly marry him yet. Alas! she little knew that he had but now greeted her with a lie in his mouth.

"You're looking your best to-day, Minnie," he whispered, as Aunt Bessie lingered behind to prick her fingers in the gorse. "Oh, why won't you say

you'll marry me, dearest? You know I've got mother's house to bring you to: it will be mine when she dies—a good, flint-walled house with two parlours and plenty of bedrooms. We could make a lot of money in the summer by letting to the visitors. You know all that, my sweet darling, but I want you to feel, and be sure, that if you marry me you will want for nothing—not even a husband who will love you and do all he can to make you ever happy."

This was rather a long effort for Giles, who had scarcely got his breath yet, after a hard run up hill, and it made him sob a little in breathing, so that Minnie was deeply moved, for she put it down to his intense feeling. Giles gazed into her face and clasped her hand. Minnie's eyes were clouded with tears, her mouth drooped with the sad, regretful longing that was coming over her. Oh, if Giles were a steadier lad! how gladly would she have returned the pressure of his hand; but as yet she was afraid to trust him. He had disappointed her so often. He had so often made promise of amendment, and failed.

"Minnie, you don't speak; you don't look at me, darling. Let me see your sweet eyes look into mine. Why, you're in tears! I know what you're thinking about; you're thinking that if you marry me I shall get tired of you, and return to my old mates, and we shall go from bad to worse. Now, isn't it so, Minnie?"

She turned upon him her beautiful black eyes, and they acted like magic upon his conscience. It came across him all in a moment what a blackguard he was, and how utterly unworthy of this charming girl; the tears actually welled into his eyes as he said, in quite a different tone from the self-satisfied one he had been employing, nay in low, impassioned utterance—

"Oh, my life, my only anchor to hold me to what is good! if you knew how I longed for you, you would relent and forgive me my past failings. I think you would, Minnie, because you are a good girl, you do what is right and love God; and if you could see how your marrying me would save me from going wrong, you would say, 'Giles Fletcher, I am willing to be your wedded wife—for better or for worse——'"

"Aye, for worse, I'll uphold it," said Aunt Bessie, coming up at that inopportune moment and spoiling their little love-making, "for worse, or I know nothing of men."

"Well, Aunt Bessie, you haven't had much experience yet," said Minnie, rather cruelly.

"It is true—too true. All I can say is they keep you a mortal long while waiting—waiting. But there! I mustn't think of myself always. Giles Fletcher, if ever there was a rogue, you're one!"

"Lor,' Aunt Bessie, whatever has come to you?" cried Minnie.

"Look yonder—at that stack o' faggots," said Aunt Bessie.

Minnie looked where her friend was pointing, and saw two men stooping down and presently running off.

"Well, now," said Minnie, "I don't see aught to be scared of."

"They had guns when they came over the hedge, now they've none," said Aunt Bessie; "'cause they've been and hid them."

"What's that got to do with me, I'd like to know?" cried Giles.

Aunt Bessie met his challenge with a bold stare.

"Do two men need three guns?" she asked.

Giles winced, but promptly replied, "No, but three men do, and if you had been as sharp as you

think, you'd ha' seen the third man keeping watch by the hedge."

"Oh, Giles, do you know them?" Minnie asked tremulously.

"I think I know who they are, but I didn't want to frighten you; and as to Aunt Bessie, I'll thank her to keep a civil tongue in her head when she speaks of me."

"Yes, Aunt Bessie, you did speak very rude to Giles."

"Giles is a deal too clever for you, Minnie; he gammons you finely. But here comes Mr. Forbes, I declare."

Forbes was striding down over the heather, and, saluting Minnie with a touch of his Scotch cap, he said—

"Good afternoon, ladies; have you seen any young fellows running off this way?"

The three exclaimed together that they had. Giles adding in a low tone—

"Mind you don't tell him where the poor fellows have hid their guns, or they will get into a row."

"Giles Fletcher, do you know them?" asked Forbes.

"Maybe I do; but it wouldn't be neighbourly to split on 'em, would it? You're paid so much a week to catch them; they're not two fields off, why don't you run, lad?"

Forbes cast an angry glance at Giles, and started in pursuit.

Aunt Bessie, being in a huff, walked apart, while Giles made excellent use of his opportunities.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SEARCH.

THAT afternoon Minnie sat silent at tea, while Aunt Bessie talked with John about the poachers. Both John and Aunt Bessie thought it very likely that Giles had been shooting too; for it was well-known that he had often employed Sunday afternoon in this fashion. Minnie made no defence, but sat pondering with her chin resting on her hand. After tea she rose and put on her bonnet and shawl, took down the lanthorn from the top drawer of the cupboard, and was going out, when John cried—

"Halloa! lass, where be'st tha' going this time o' day?"

"Not far, John; but it gets so dark these winter nights."

"She's after something," said John, as the door shut behind her; "and she must be strange and soft to want a lanthorn, for the moon will be up in half an hour."

"It's my belief she's distraught with love, John. She hardly ever answers a plain question now, like a sensible body, but keeps mum as a mouse in a

trap, and when you've forgotten all about the question, pat comes th' answer, fit to make you drop with amazement."

"She's got hold o' summut now in that head of hers, you may depend on't: she can't abear to hear Giles called poacher, and she's gone to prove him innocent."

"Ay, and she'll want more than one lanthorn to find his honesty. I doubt if the 'lectric light could ravel out a bit of truthful nature in that young man."

"Come, come, Bessie! that's saying a deal more than is warranted. The chap likes a bit o' shooting: so does the Squire's son; so does every English lad. I reckon it's bred in us ever sin' Robin Hood's days, and afore that too. Well, he ain't got no land to speak on, no woods, no plantations, no turnips, no gorse, no heather, and the Squire—he doesn't give our fellows invitation to shoot over his preserves; well, it follows, plain enough, that either Giles and the likes of him must give up shooting or take it as they can get it on the sly."

"I do wonder at you, John, defending poaching."

"I don't—I don't, mind you! I think it very wrong, dishonest, foolish tempting of the devil to get you into the lock-up: but they don't look at it like that; they all begin it from sporting instinct—first a rat or a weasel, then a rabbit, then a wood-pigeon or a wild duck, and so on, till they get to partridges and home-reared pheasants. Ah! it's a bad job! That poaching brings many a fine young fellow to trouble. It's the beginning of a fall, Bess. One fault, one vice breeds many: let a man think himself a scoundrel, and he proceeds to live up to it; let his neighbours whisper ill of him, and he will make the scandal a true story. It's a marvellous rum thing is conscience, and I often think 'tis like one of our boats on the slide that

goes down to the beach; it's mortal hard to get her up, but a child can set her slithering on the downward track."

"Well, I suppose I must put the tea-thing. away, for he won't come in to-night, I fear."

"Aye, Bess, put them up; you're an example to us all, I'm sure, for faith and patience, and you deserve to be put alongside old Job hisself."

"Hush, John! don't compare me with Bible names. But stay! was that the gate snicked?"

Alas! it was only the wife of a deacon who was yearning for a chat.

What, then, was Minnie doing with the lanthorn?

Well, the more she had thought about it, the more she had felt constrained to find out whether Giles had indeed a gun hidden in the faggots; till at last she could rest no longer, but rushed forth into the dark street with her lanthorn, not yet lighted, and made for the lane by which she had returned in the afternoon.

It was not yet late enough for the chapel-goers to meet her; the streets were silent and deserted; most of the folk were still at tea or sitting round the fire.

As she passed along she heard in one house loud voices, and said to herself, "There's Joe Fletcher arguing with his wife." From another she heard the dismal strains of a harmonium, and said, "Poor Miss Smith! she's going through her four Sunday tunes." But, as a rule, there was a deep silence within and without, and when she left behind her the lights of the last house, she began to feel something akin to fear.

Yet was not the lane quite dark, for the snow on the road reflected a pale light which served to direct her steps, and before she had reached the woods she turned to look at the sea, and saw a

beautiful silver beam illuminating the distant waters. Presently from the edge of a fleecy cloud the bright moon stole out and swam into the blue, making the whole scene, ocean, cliffs, red-bricked town, black wood, and sparkling snow, as clear as though they had been seen in daylight. Then she moved forward, with her long shadow stalking before her, and the idle lanthorn flapping and tinkling as it swayed with every step she took.

Soon she had reached the cart-track which crossed the moor, and went in the shade of the high hedge up the long ascent, and, whenever she stopped to take breath, she could hear little noises in the heather or along the hedge—sometimes a rustle, as of a weasel in pursuit of a rabbit; sometimes a bird stirring uneasily on its perch; sometimes a distant squeak, as of some victim caught by a blood-thirsty foe.

And yet above all floated the silver moon, so majestically calm and beautiful; it seemed to her as if God in heaven cared not how cruel were the creatures of earth. Perhaps, she thought, he cares not whether Giles turns out a bad man or a good man, cares not whether I suffer a whole life of misery, or whether I am happy and blessed. God is so far off, woman is so small and weak, not worth His notice: He has greater things to think of.

Poor Minnie! she knew well enough that she was wrong, she felt in her heart that this was all a lie: but to-night she could not help being a little bitter; somehow things were going wrong with her, and she knew not why; she had a feeling that Giles would never turn from his bad ways, and a sense of loneliness and despair was coming over her. Presently she drew near the faggot-stack with a beating heart, and stole on tiptoe across the frozen heath

towards the great shadow which it cast upon the snow. She had to stoop and peer about before she found an entrance at one end, just large enough for one person to enter at a time. It was dark within, but luckily she had her lanthorn ; soon its red light was contrasting with the pale moonbeams outside, and she began to look carefully for any signs of concealed treasure. There was nothing to be seen ; she began to think the men must have returned for their guns. But still she went on trying the faggots, to see if any of the bundles were loose, and at last she pulled one out easily, and, on holding the lanthorn to the hole which she had made, she discerned the butts of three guns.

With trembling hands she pulled them out and carefully examined them. Yes, they had marks on them, but they were figures of animals ; one had a fish, the second was decorated with a dog's head, the third had a figure of a seal upon it. But why did Minnie Fletcher start when she saw the rude engraving of the seal ?

Because it reminded her of a little trifle in her childhood : many years ago she had amused the company gathered round her mother's fire by saying, "I like Cousin Giles's eyes, mother, because they are just like the seal's that the men from Lynn brought round last summer." The good folk had laughed at the time, and Giles was often called "Minnie's seal," and would tease her by asking if she should carry him round, when she was a big girl, for the neighbours to stare at.

All this came back to her when she looked upon the figure of the seal, and made her feel very miserable. She had not much doubt now that the gun belonged to Giles. Now, what should she do? Should she leave the gun there, or carry it back to Giles and accuse him of having deceived her ? But, she re-

flected, though the gun was his, she could not prove that he had been using it; some one else might have had it out to-day. In fact, she felt sure that Giles would not have told her a lie; when she recalled his tender words she reproached herself for suspecting him for a moment. What, then, was she to do?

A sudden thought shot into her brain. She replaced the other guns, hid the shortened fowling-piece under her cloak, blew out the lanthorn, and left the faggot-heap, striding swiftly over the crisp tufts of heather, and descending the hill. But when she reached the lane, she turned inland, away from her home!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CLUE.

IT was a narrow lane between high banks which Minnie had chosen. There were woods on either side, and the moon had not yet risen high enough to peep with genial face into that dark recess. Minnie trudged along rather slowly, for the gun under her cloak and the lanthorn in her hand made walking uphill rather hard work. But she had an idea, and was bent on carrying it out: and when a Fletcher gets hold of an idea, it takes a mighty strong will to thwart it; for it seems to have fangs, like a double tooth, which reach down into the very depths of will and conscience.

At last she emerged from the protecting banks upon the top of the moor, where the snow was sparkling about the gorse and heather in the brightest of moonbeams. Here four roads crossed, and Minnie turned sharp to the right down the road which led direct to Beckthorp. It was easier now, but rather slippery, for the road wound round in its downward course between sandy banks fringed with gorse and

yellow bracken. Soon she reached the sleepy village. Not a soul was stirring in the street; the church, too, was dark, for there was no evening service. By the churchyard she turned up to the left, and climbed the hill that led to the gamekeeper's lodge.

Yes, there was a light burning in the window. Quietly she shut the gate and crossed the little bridge that spanned the stream, and, as she drew near the lodge, the sound of singing struck upon her ear. Was there company within? if so, she must return. She stopped and listened. She could hear two voices, a man's and a woman's; they were singing a Christmas hymn—"On earth peace, and good will to men."

It was important for Minnie to be assured that no one else was present except Angus Forbes and his sister; so she stepped across the border, and placed her face close to the diamond panes of the window. Then she saw for a moment Angus standing on one side of the fireplace, and Jean sitting by the table—no one else was there. But just as she got close to the window the lanthorn rattled against the stone wall; then the dogs behind the lodge broke out into angry barking. Angus glanced toward the window, and in a moment dashed across the room towards the door, and almost before Minnie could recover herself and regain the path, a strong hand had clutched her shoulder, and Angus had growled—

"Who are you? What are you doing at my window?"

"Oh, Mr. Forbes, you hurt me!" cried the frightened girl.

"What! is it Minnie Fletcher? I ask your pardon, I'm sure. Come in and warm yourself, do! When I heard the dogs give tongue, I thought sure it was

some tramp. Jean, here's Minnie Fletcher come to see you."

Jean jumped up, saying, "Well, I never! You've given us all a start. But come in, dear. There's something the matter, I doubt; you're looking scared-like, and as white as a sheet."

"Let me take the lanthorn," said Angus, and he placed a chair for her near the fire.

"I'm sorry, neighbours," said Minnie, with a little gasp and half-repressed sob,—"I'm very sorry to trouble you on a Sabbath evening, but—but——" The tears were in Minnie's eyes now, and she could not go on.

"Get her some of the cordial, Angus," whispered Jean to her brother.

But when Angus left the room to fetch the cordial, Minnie said, "Kiss me, Jean, and promise to help me in my trouble."

With some difficulty Angus prevailed upon the little lips to moisten themselves with a few strengthening drops. He coaxed and commanded, and at last held her hands as if she had been a struggling dog, reluctant to take proper remedies.

"Well, now I feel much better—I really do; so sit you down, and let me tell you why I've come."

"Won't you take your cloak off first?" asked Jean.

"Not yet awhile, thank you. What I came here for was to bring you something that I want you to keep for me. Angus Forbes, you know well enough that my Cousin Giles goes out and shoots the Squire's hares and rabbits?"

Angus nodded, and looked very grave.

"He's not a bad lad at heart, Giles isn't; but he can't keep the good resolves he makes. He falls into temptation, and forgets himself, and all his promises are broken before he can think twice

about it. 'Tis a thousand pities to see a fine young lad go to his ruin—and he's my cousin."

"Aye, and something nearer than a cousin," murmured Angus.

Minnie took no notice of the interruption.

"You saw him out walking with me this afternoon, when some of his pals were poaching about yonder. I want to keep him steady; I want to save him from disgrace and the gaol,—and—and I thought one good thing would be if I could get his gun and remove it from harm's way,—and I've got it."

"Did he give it you of his freewill?" asked Jean.

"No, I found out where he kept it, and I took it; and see, here it is! I've had it under my cloak all along."

Thus saying, she laid it down in two pieces on the table.

Angus reached out his hand, and fitted the butt end on to the barrel without saying a word.

Minnie rose to go. "I shall think it very kind of you, Mr. Forbes, if you will take care of that gun for me. It may be doing something to keep a young man out of trouble; and you'll not regret that, will you?" And she held out her hand.

Angus pressed it as he replied, "The piece shall be safe with me, and no one shall be the wiser, Miss Fletcher,"—laying an emphasis on *Miss*. "I don't feel sorry to try and save a young man from ruin, but I'd a deal rather save a young woman from taking a step—a rash step—which may land her in a lifelong sorrow. Oh, Minnie, why will you not love me?"

"Ask Jean about a girl's feelings, Angus. She will tell you that we can't put our affections just where we like—can we, Jean? Sometimes we love

the least worthy; and perhaps God makes us that silly, so that haply our love may lift the weaker one into a higher walk—a better way."

"That's fine preaching, Minnie," said Angus, sadly. "However, if you can't love me, there's no help for it. All I can say is, if ever Minnie Fletcher wants a friend in her need, she has only got to call here, and I'm ready to go through fire and water for her."

"Thank you, my dear, good friend,—thank you a thousand times—and Jean. Good night; I must go."

"Poor thing! her eyes were full of tears," said Jean, "and I almost thought she was a-going to kiss you—her face came so near yours."

Angus replied by a heavy sigh.

He sat down by the table, and leaned his face against his hands, suffering in silence for many minutes; and if ever Jean spoke to him in a soothing voice he gave but little heed, till she went up to him, and put her hand on his shoulder, saying—

"Don't take on like that, Angus. I can't bear to see it. If she likes Giles Fletcher best, she is no fit wife for you."

"Don't say that!" said Angus, passionately; "don't speak a word against Minnie. I know she's too good for me, but I can't bear that slippery liar, Giles Fletcher, getting her—that's too much for me. Poor little Minnie! Poor girl!"

Jean was surprised by her brother's outburst. He who was generally so self-contained seemed quite carried away by his feelings. His eyes looked wild and cruel. Jean saw the fire of jealousy burning in them, and it frightened her.

She opened her Bible, and began to read. An hour went by, and still Angus sat with his elbows

on the table and his face buried in his hands. Then she got up, and said softly—

"Brother, I'm going to bed. I shall not forget in my prayers to ask our Heavenly Father to give you comfort."

Angus lifted his head, and replied—

"Jean, you're a good girl; but I doubt I'm past praying for. I feel as if a devil had got possession of me."

"Heaven help you in your trouble, dear. Think of other people's sorrows, and your own will seem smaller. Do nothing rash, Angus; but remember little Willie—and me."

"Aye, aye, lass; and poor father too!"

Jean went to her room, but she left the door ajar that she might hear if Angus went out.

Jean's room was upstairs; Angus and Willie slept in a room leading out of their sitting-room, which was also the kitchen. Angus was muttering to himself. Something in the sound of his father's name had stirred thoughts within him. He glanced sharply round the room, as if the very suspicion which had crossed his brain was too dreadful to betray to another. All was quiet; Willie was sleeping peacefully in the next room—he could hear his regular breathing.

"My poor father! what if—— Bah! I am going mad. It is impossible! Father! father! who was thy murderer? God, give me the means of finding out the wretch who shot my poor father. Ah! I have been too careless about this; I have let thy blood grow cold on the ground, father. And now I turn like stone all over, and shiver like a child, I don't know why. But a dreadful suspicion has come to me. I have no reason for it—none at all. I believe it is prompted by the devil. I will struggle against it. No; I can do better than that—I can disprove it in a moment."

Thus muttering to himself, Angus Forbes shook back the disordered hair from his face, set his lips firmly, and took up Giles Fletcher's gun, turning it round and examining the barrel with a keen glance. Hardly had he taken it up when he dropped it with a heavy thud upon the table.

"What's that?" cried Jean, from the top of the stairs.

"Nothing, lass, nothing; I only dropped something. Good night."

But Angus had turned white as he sat back in his chair; then he pulled his handkerchief out of his pocket, and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"What must be, must be," he murmured, as he slowly stood up to reach something from the ceiling.

It was the ram-rod which had been found by his father's body in the fir wood, and which had been nailed to the great oak beam that crossed the ceiling.

With hands that trembled a little, Angus turned the gun round. It had a makeshift ram-rod! Would this ram-rod fit? He hoped not—yes, he devoutly hoped not now. It would be too dreadful to find that Giles had been the murderer of his father, that Minnie had been the innocent betrayer of her lover!

The gun had been shortened in the barrel for convenience in carrying it under the coat: the ram-rod had had a piece cut off one end; it exactly fitted!

Angus put the gun down on the table, and sat down to think. Who was the murderer, then? Was it Giles? It looked very much as if Giles's gun had done the deed. But still there was room for doubt: some one else might have taken his

gun; one of his friends, who knew where the gun was kept, might have borrowed it.

Why should Giles kill the keeper? He owed him no grudge at all. There was no motive apparent; it was most improbable. A doubt once more came into the young man's mind; if nearly all poachers used shortened guns, then this ram-rod need not necessarily belong to this gun.

He again took up the gun and examined it carefully; there was a fish, or seal, or something cut on the stock: he now examined the ram-rod—the same fish, or seal, was found there!

Then the ram-rod belonged to Giles's gun!

Angus sighed, and tried to think what he should do. As he shut his eyes, he seemed to see his father in the wood pointing to the blood on the ground, and saying, "Avenge this, my son, if thou lovest me."

Angus shuddered at the thought.

Again he seemed to see the pale face of Minnie Fletcher, and her large black eyes were fixed reproachfully upon him. She kept on saying, "You have brought my love to the gallows! You have ruined all my life."

And again he saw himself walking down the street, and could hear the neighbours whispering, as he passed, "There goes young Mr. Forbes, the man who got Giles Fletcher hanged for murder. Why did he do it, do you say? Out of jealousy. They both loved the same young woman."

For nearly an hour he sat, pondering over the thoughts that came to him, as duty, filial love, jealousy, alternately mastered his mind. He might have sat there all night, but that he heard Jean stirring in the room above; so he hastily rose and replaced the ram-rod by the joist, and, when she called lightly down the staircase—

"Are you going to bed, Angus, the night or no?"

"Faith, lass," he called back, "I must ha' been dreaming. I'll sit up no longer to fright you wi' my vagaries! I'm just off to bed, Jean. The fire's safe and the windows are fast. I'm just off now. Good night, lass."

CHAPTER XV.

THE HEDGER'S STORY.

ANGUS FORBES had plenty to do out in the fields and woods, so that the terrible suspicion did not weigh on him so heavily as it would do on one who led a less active life. Yet he carried the secret about with him wherever he went, and it cast a gloom on his life just now. The spring was coming, the pheasant broods must be thought of, coops must be painted and got ready, faggots must be placed for the young broods to run to if a hawk came sailing by, and grain had to be sown in the clearings between the copses to attract the pheasants and keep them together. Willie often accompanied his brother, when school was over, and vastly enjoyed himself, climbing trees for eggs or young squirrels. Willie's tongue wagged fast on the subject of finches in the hedge, or missel-thrushes in the park, or tomtits in the loose mortar of the ha-ha wall, and he often silently wondered to himself why Angus was so glum and silent. The very dogs that followed obedient at his heel seemed to discover a difference in their master's behaviour; one would whine and nose his hand, another would look up sideways into his face

with a wistful gaze, and then with a sigh would return to heel.

Angus went about his work without taking any step, or knowing indeed what step to take.

But one afternoon, as he was looking at an old man cutting a hedge, he heard something which startled him.

"Well, George," he had said, "don't you slash all the young saplings; but when you come across one, cut away the bushes on each side to give it room, do ye hear?"

"Aye, Mr. Forbes; I ha' done this job nigh fifty year now, I reckon. What! get away, you sniffing brute; do you remember the taste you got o' my arm yonder?"

The mastiff bitch had jumped across the ditch, and was vigorously sniffing round the man's legs.

"What, George! she surely hasn't bitten you?"

"Let bygones be bygones—with dogs and men, say I. I've knowed this bitch from a puppy, and she oughtn't to ha' bitten me by rights. However, we all make mistakes sometimes, master."

The old man turned to his work, and slashed away as if to make up for time wasted, making believe to hum a psalm tune the while. But Angus, having his thoughts always on one subject, had noticed the old man's confusion. He stood for some minutes rapt in thought. Old George had been noted in his young days as a poacher; he was suspected even now of having a sneaking kindness that way. Now the mastiff bitch was never allowed out with any one but himself; his father had kept her in the kennel unless he had taken her out himself. When could she have bitten George, then?

He remembered that on the fatal night when his father was murdered, this bitch followed on the track of the murderer. Was George, then, the villain

who had robbed him of his beloved father? It looked like it, certainly. George had doubtless taken Giles Fletcher's gun from its hiding-place; it was old George who had, perhaps for some harsh words, so cruelly shot his father. As this conclusion pressed itself upon him, he felt his heart throb, and a fierce desire came upon him to set the mastiff upon the old scoundrel, and see her tear his throat out. But he clenched his fist, and breathed hard, and said nothing. When, at last, George turned round to look at the man who stood there so long watching him, the stern, set mouth, the angry eyes frightened him.

"Oh, Lor', Mr. Forbes, how you do look at un!"

"I am trying hard to restrain my just anger, George. I am trying to keep my hand from killing you."

The old man dropped his bill-hook, as if he had been shot; his lower jaw fell, and he stared wildly.

"What would you do if you were in my place? What would you do if you saw before you the murderer of your father?"

"There! I thought you was at that, sir, I did indeed. Don't look like that, Mr. Angus Forbes; you frighten me. I can explain all I've ever done—I can so, sir."

"Come across the ditch, and speak the truth—ay, speak the truth, and I'll never hand you over to the police. But if I catch you lying, this bitch shall bury her fangs in your windpipe. Now, do you understand me?"

"I do, sir, I do. Oh that I should live to see the day! But what can I do? You don't want me to tell no names?"

"Tell me first how the bitch got hold of you."

The old man looked down, then, out of his eye-corners: he was evidently seeking for a lie that

would save him and his friends; he coughed and spat, and coughed again.

"Very well," said Angus; "I see you don't mean telling me the truth this side o' midsummer, so I will put the matter in the hands of the police. I think you will swing for it, George. You see, there's no other time that this bitch could have bitten you, except the night my father was shot: that looks bad for you, doesn't it? And I'll tell you something more: you borrowed a gun that night, and you dropped the ram-rod; there was a mark on the ram-rod, and there was the same mark on the gun. I've got the gun, and I know whose it is."

George started at this, and muttered, half to himself, "If he knows who 'tis, it won't be splitting if I tell un."

"You can do as you like about telling me; it is against *you* that the strongest evidence now lies."

George broke out into a sweat, great beads stood on his forehead, and he visibly trembled with excitement.

"Mr. Forbes, you won't say I've gone and peached now!"

"Certainly not. Speak the truth, and no harm shall come to you for it."

"You won't have un run in for the—unfortunate job?"

"I shall give no promise of that kind. If you make your friends amongst murderers, you must expect some of them to come to untimely ends."

"Well, sir, it was this how; but I needn't name no names to-day, if *you* please."

"Go on; if it suits me, I shall ask you for the name."

"I'd a deal rather be shot in the leg than split on un; howiver, it was this how. I 'ad come out to see a hare snicked by some of our young chaps, and

I was standing top o' yon hill when a young fellow came running up straight towards me, he did; and just as——"

"Stop! had there been any shot fired in the wood then?"

George examined his boot, and saw an opening for a lie.

"Oh no; not a shot had been fired, that I'll swear!"

"All right; go on with your tale."

"Well, mister, just as the young chap was gotten nigh where I was, I saw this 'ere bitch following, muzzle down, and——"

"Stop, you wicked liar!" shouted Angus, seizing him by the throat, and nearly throttling him, while the mastiff sprang at him and knocked him clean over.

"Down, bitch, down! There, you're not much hurt; but I warn you, you must tell me no more lies."

"Blessed if it was a lie, mister. Why do you say 'twas a lie?"

"Because this bitch was held in a leather leash till the keeper was shot. I then let her go after the murderer."

A low whistle came from George's white lips; it evidently meant that, for his part, he gave up the game.

"Now, I hope, mister, you don't think I told that lie to save my own neck. No; it was to save young —him I, mean, as the gun belonged to."

"Ah yes; you mean Giles Fletcher."

"Well, I'm gormed! if you don't know every mortal thing!"

"I told you I had his gun, George. Go on with your tale."

"Yes, just as Giles was close to me, up comes the

bitch, and jumps up about his shoulders. Lor', what a screech he gave, to be sure! But I seized her by her collar, and was dragging her off when she bit me i' the arm. Look! you can see the blamed scar now. Then we tied her to a tree, and left her. And I'm strange and sorry I ever had owt to do wi' that job. Mr. Forbes—the old un—was as nice't a gentleman as ever broke a dog. I was that sorry when I heard un had shot un as if it 'ad been my own son. Not but what it was an accident, in course. Why should any one wish to kill the keeper?"

A wave of tender feeling rushed over Angus, and choked him. Ah! why should any one desire to kill his father? Had he not been kindness itself to everybody who needed help or comfort in time of trouble? When he could, he stammered out—

"How many guns had you out that night?"

"Only that one, sir,—leastways," he corrected himself on reflection, "there might have been more, so there might."

"Well, I suppose there's nothing more to be got from you to-day. Now, shall you go straight to Giles Fletcher, and tell him he's suspected of the murder?"

"Not I! He would say, 'Who's been splitting on me?' I shan't take no more notice of what we've been saying than a child's doll."

"I should advise you to keep your mouth shut, George. I'm glad to find you didn't do it, but it's a terrible thing to think that young Fletcher——"

"It is, sir; not but what it might ha' been any one else, you know,—we munna jump at it like."

"He dropped his ram-rod by my father's body, George."

"I forgot that, mister. H'm! it's getting rather

'queer story' now; and I am so wooden-headed, I'm afraid of saying owt for fear I should mak' things worser. If I may, mister, I'd like to go on plashing that there hedge. I'm never satisfied when I'm gossiping about."

"No, you're a whining old hypocrite and a liar," thought Angus, as he called the mastiff and walked away.

"She would let a little more light into the story," he said to himself, as he swung over the heather, "if I were to take her down and let her see Giles Fletcher. I wonder if the bitch would take any notice of him now! I must contrive to let her get sight of him before long."

The young gamekeeper went back to the tall wood where his father had lain. He sat down on a fallen tree near the sacred spot, and rested his hot forehead on one hand, remaining so long motionless that a hare cantered before him quite unconcernedly, and two young rabbits frolicked before his eyes, and then sat up and washed their faces in the prettiest way imaginable. Yet he sat pondering on the moral problem which was making his heart ache. It was here his father was shot; there had been the blood-stains, and they called loudly on him for his avenging arm. If Giles was the murderer, as it seemed only too probable, ought he not to denounce him at once? Ought he to allow Minnie to marry a murderer? Ought he not to save her from so fearful a fate?

Yet, again, if he should be mistaken, and if Giles should be accused by him in vain, would not people say he had sought to destroy a rival by wicked slander?

Angus sighed to himself as he saw difficulties arise in whatever course he might take.

"I must wait," he thought, "and seek more light,

stronger evidence. Giles may be innocent; God grant he may!"

Above his head the wood-pigeons cooed and made love; all nature seemed happy and at peace. He said to himself, "Yes, it is true—man alone is vile." Then the mastiff came and put her nose into his hand, startling him out of his brown study. He rose from his moss-grown seat, and set his face towards the hill and home. It was better, at all events, to be up and stirring, doing the day's duty manfully, rather than sitting down to meditate on to-morrow's possibilities. He felt this; he determined to bide his time, and see what more could be gleaned from the field of observation. But, though he resolved to throw off care and play the man, none the less did the smile die out of his eye and the dimple fade from his cheek. Jean noticed the change in him, and, sighing quietly, made no remark. Little Willie grumbled to himself and to the puppies.

"Angus ain't up to any games now. That comes o' wearing father's velveteens, drat 'em! I don't see why folks should give over playing games when they grows up; do you, puppy? I shan't. That's why so few folk tries to be good, I know; 'cos the old folks makes out there's no games up yonder." And Willie lifted his eyes slightingly to the scudding cloud.

CHAPTER XVI.

GEORGE PLAYS A TRUMP CARD.

A FEW evenings after Angus had had the talk with old George, Giles Fletcher strolled in to see what was going on in the Jolly-boats Tavern.

"Well done, Giles, lad! yer don't often pay us a visit nowadays—too busy sweethearting, I reckon."

Giles smiled one of his handsome smiles, and kissed his hand at the speaker, who looked somewhat obscure through the veil of smoke which was curling lazily about the warm room.

"There's talk of bringing a railway to this 'ere place," said one of the Fletchers, as Giles stirred his grog in the tumbler.

"Well, I guess we shall reap the benefit of it," said Giles, looking round at the company for the first time.

"Shall us get a better market for our fish?" said a weatherbeaten old sailor whose front teeth had gone by the board.

"Yes, we shall," said Giles; "and, what's more, it'll fetch a lot of visitors here for us to pluck like pigeons."

"That's all very well for you rich chaps as has apartments to let, and nicknacks on the chimbley-piece, and a pianny to tinkle in the parlour. But what good will they visitors do ussen?"

"Anyhow, they'll eat your fish, John; but if this 'ere railway be a coming really, the best thing for every fisherman in Beckthorp would be to sell his boat and tackle and buy a house, or build one. Three hundred pounds will do it, and you can borrow most of it. If you want to be rich, lads, that's the gainest way to make your pile."

An old grumbler rose in the corner, and, advancing unsteadily to the table with his glass in his hand, remarked, with some emphasis and temper—

"Hang me if I like these 'ere iron roads. We was well enough off afore. What do they want to come and shoot a lot of foreigners on our shore for, I'd like to know? When we get a train puffing about, folks 'll go away to do their shopping; they won't buy at my store."

"Not unless you get in some new cheeses sometimes, Ned."

The conversation then became so personal, the cheese question so virulent, that the landlord had to interfere, and beg the company to be jolly on pain of dismissal.

"That's right," said Giles; "we are here to refresh ourselves, not to quarrel over Ned's cheeses. Ned, you shut up your shutters now, and take a bit of advice in good part. There's no doubt that a railway makes trade, and those who can soonest fit themselves to new surroundings will prosper most. But, mates, if the railways would lower their rates for parcels, so that country eggs, chicken, crabs, lobsters, fish could go to market right cheap, what a roaring trade we should have! There's thousands —millions of people—who are waiting for our

country produce, and can't get it, because the rates are too high."

"Shame!" "Why does they do it?"

"Aye, boys, they must in time come round to see which side their bread is buttered; and if they can't —if they're going to stand across the iron road, like Dick Turpin, then I say the Government must step in and buy up the railroads."

"Well, if that isn't a good un!" "He be a smart young feller, that!" "Ought to be a member o' Parly-ment, surely!"

Giles was enjoying the sweet incense of flattery, when he felt some one pulling at his jacket.

"What's that you said just now about buying a house for tree-hundard pounds neighbour?"

Giles turned and saw old George, the hedger, who had been sitting quietly in the corner by the fire. He was in drink.

"Didn't you hear, old un? I'm not going to say it again to please a boozey old fool like you."

"Oh! is that it?" said George, in a superior tone; "but I'm not so boozed as not to know who I'm a-speaking to."

"Well, go and lie down, and don't trouble your betters."

"My betters, indeed! I'll larn you to speak respectful, young man, afore I've done with you, —remember Maister Forbes!"

Giles started. The man was in liquor, certainly, but he might do a great deal of harm if he set people thinking that Giles Fletcher was the man who shot the gamekeeper.

"Do yer hear, young Giles Fletcher? You've got to keep a civil tongue in yer head when you speaks to the likes o' me. Why shouldn't I have a tree-hundard pound house as well as the rest o' 'em? You'll ha' to lend me some money, young un."

"All right. George, don't speak so loud. If you want to talk to me about money, go on the cliff west'ard, and I'll come to you."

George was sober enough to see that he could make his bargain better when no one was by; and he did not want to get Giles into any trouble about the keeper. He had a shrewd suspicion that Giles had fired the fatal shot, but he could not feel sure about it. He had never said anything to Giles about it before to-night, and it was only the extra tumbler that had made him daring enough to hint at it. However, the thing was done now; so he slowly rose to depart, smiling to himself an imbecile smile of satisfaction, and feeling proud of his position of superiority over Giles Fletcher.

"Depend upon it," he muttered to himself, when he got outside, "there's something in it, or he wouldn't take the trouble to meet me on the cliff and talk things over."

Giles waited a decent while, and then followed George; but he was turning hot and cold and shivering with terror, for he felt that this old man held his fate in the hollow of his hand; the nightmare of the gallows which had tortured him so often seemed to be coming true. It was nearly dark now, and he had almost touched the stile before he saw George sitting there with his pipe in his mouth.

"Halloa, George, what do you want with me?"

"I've been thinking, Giles Fletcher, that I've known you since ever you was a baby, and I'm not the man to try and get any one as is friendly into trouble—not I."

"But what did you mean by saying, 'Remember Master Forbes'? You're in liquor, George, and don't hardly know what you're about. If you said that when you were sober, I should——"

"What 'ud yer do?" snarled George, as the

alcohol supplied him with five of courage to one of prudence.

"Look here, old un, it's cold sitting here. Come up on cliff, and we can walk and keep warm as we talk this out."

George unsteadily dropped off the stile, and his "one of prudence" led him to walk on the landward side, for he felt like staggering off the cliff when he walked too near.

They went some hundred yards in silence. The turf was springy and soft, but there were many rabbit-holes difficult to avoid in the gloaming. On their left loomed the dark woods of the Squire; on their right moaned the grey, restless sea, with a cadence of trailing pebbles. The cliff was getting higher and higher as they ascended the solitary slope of greensward.

"George, you aren't fit for arguing just now, I reckon; but you can understand, can't you?"

"Aye, lad; let's hear how much you'll give un."

"Well, I suppose you mean to let folks think I was the chap who shot Master Forbes, don't you?"

"Not if I can get helped to a nice house, Giles. I'll be the last man in the parish to speak ill of my neighbour."

"Thank you for nothing! And suppose I said I would not give you a brass farthing, and you might tell what lies you liked? they couldn't harm an innocent man."

"Ah, well; then it 'ud be mortal hard for you, Giles. I did not see you shoot un, did I?"

"No; you only guess it because you saw me run from the wood, as the other chaps did."

The beer was preventing prudence from keeping sealed lips; beer blurted out evidence which the old man had been thinking out and treasuring up, night after night, in the dark corner of the Three

Jolly-boats, day after day, amongst the clinging creepers of the overgrown hedge.

"Aye, lad; 'tother chaps ran away—very like,—but the old bitch—she knew fast enough who 'ad killed her maister."

Giles was taken aback. The evidence of the mastiff was so impartial. He felt that people would be impressed by that more than by anything else.

"Look here, George; I don't deny that it is a very ugly mistake that hound made. I was near the keeper, and my trail must have crossed Ned—no, I won't, even to save my own life, bring another into trouble."

"Ned—say'st thee? Na, lad, 'twas Giles safe enough, I'll up'ode it; dog isn't no fool, though he be no scholar."

"I can't deny that the dog's evidence looks ugly; but who says the dog chased me? Why, old George, the hedger! And why does he say it? 'Cause he wants to get money out o' me—hush-money! Folks won't believe it of me; folks will see through you fast enough, old un."

"I dunno! I think I can get some more evidence if I be put to it like; but first I want to know how much you're going to give me to keep my mouth shut?"

"What do you want, you bad, bothering blackguard?"

"I want one hundred pounds down, Giles Fletcher; I can manage to borrow the rest, maybe."

"A hundred pounds! Why, how could I get that from mother without letting her know why I wanted it?"

"That's not my business. I must ha' the full hundred."

"Think, George: I am looking forward to getting married. If I were able to give you all that money

out of my savings, it would stop my marriage for years."

"That's not my business; you should ha' thought on these 'ere questions afore you let fly at Maister Forbes."

"You liar! how dare you say I shot him! What reason had I to shoot the keeper?"

"Well, you can keep the hundred pound, but it's my belief you'll get run in for the job, an' it'll sarve you right."

"Oh! it will serve me right, will it?"

Giles's voice had grown husky. He asked this question in slow, measured tones. If there had been more light, George, the hedger, would have seen a dangerous glitter in Giles's eyes; but it was too dusk, and he went on in beery innocence—

"I've al'ays liked you, from a lad, Giles Fletcher; but you've disgraced yourself now and your poor mother, and I shouldn't wonder if you got took up for murder any day. What's a hundred pounds to the likes o' you? Say the word, and I'll swear a Bible oath to keep mum about it. You can trust me, Giles; one hundred pounds shall buy a dead silence."

"I can do it cheaper," murmured Giles—"cheaper that way, and more dependable."

"What do you say? I'm deaf that side? Oh! oh!"

There was a heavy thud in the region of old George's stomach, which took most of his breath away; he was doubled up, and sank on the ground.

"Say your prayers, you villain," said Giles, stooping over him. "You force me to do it. I can't trust your Bible oath, you know; but I can trust a dead silence."

George was utterly unable to speak; all the breath was out of him, and he gasped convulsively.

GILES . . . PEEPED OVER TO SEE HOW OLD GEORGE GOT ON IN HIS DOWNWARD FLIGHT. *Page* 125.

"Come along with you," said Giles, dragging the old man by both feet to the edge of the cliff. But when George saw the sheen of the grey water far below, he clung desperately to the young man, and it became necessary to deal him a smashing blow on the head to make him let go.

Then his head fell back, and in a moment he had glided quietly over the grassy verge, and was gone.

Giles was a lad of nerve, and he peeped over to see how old George got on in his downward flight.

It was a sandy cliff, perpendicular halfway down, then came a little jutting piece of damp clay, and then another steep piece, and the big flint boulders at the base. Giles saw George come head first on the clay, turn a summersault, and take a fresh leap for the boulders. He could not see any more, but above the gentle murmur of the distant waves he thought he heard a rustle among the flints.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DEAD HAND.

WHEN the first fever of excitement had cooled down, and Giles was aware of the terrible nature of his mad, impulsive act, he buried his face in his hands and shuddered; then he knelt down, and made excuses for himself to Heaven. Did he think he could deceive the Almighty as he had hitherto deceived his neighbours? But hark! the poor fellow is praying now: he had never meant to commit a murder, he says.

"Lord, forgive me! He forced me to it, to save my own character. If a man may kill a thief who robs his house, surely it is not a sin to put one away who tries to rob you of your good name! But I am sorry; yes, I am very sorry for poor George——"

Here he rose from his knees, and looked wildly about him through the advancing gloom; the sense of loneliness made his hair seem to stand on end, and he felt afraid.

Presently he crept to the edge of the cliff, and in a hoarse whisper called "George!"

There was no sound, no voice, no moan save

from the sea; an uncanny feeling made Giles turn every now and then to see if George was coming up from behind to push him over the cliff. He could not help feeling that George was creeping up behind him, grinning at him horribly with broken head and bleeding face. He could feel some strange power pushing him to the very edge of the crumbling cliff.

Oh! if he did not at once tear himself away, George's spirit would have his revenge, and thrust him over!

Giles turned his face towards the land, and fled from the cliff, in horror and remorse, as fast as he could run.

But it was now nearly dark, and he had not gone far before a rabbit-hole tripped him up, and laid him sprawling on his face, well-nigh stunned by the shock.

Meanwhile, Minnie had been sitting quietly at home, after a pleasant little tea with Giles's mother, and she was now reviewing in her mind all the nice things she had seen in Giles's house, while the knitting-needles made a gentle applause to every thought, clapping their little foolish hands with every semblance of approval.

There were two parlours, she said to herself, on the ground-floor, fairly furnished with specimens out of several suites of furniture. There were two oak chairs with leather seats, splendid creations of the last century they were; by the side of these antiquities were three cane chairs, one of them with larger holes in its bottom than the artist had conceived them; then there was a waggonette of mahogany with cupboards that locked, a table of rosewood too good to eat upon, and a moth-eaten armchair that had been taken from a wreck, and might have belonged to the King of Spain, so the

villagers said, three hundred years ago. You were requested not to sit down with a bump when you were seen backing in the direction of King Philip. Poor old soul! he had gone on three casters ever since Minnie was a wee child. There was a cabinet in black oak with glass doors, containing treasures of many generations: in it were shells and polished stones, a skull found at low water with a crab inside, some marriage lines nicely sewn on white satin, coins of old time and of foreign lands, scraps of clothes which had belonged to ancestors whom the cruel sea had swallowed up in an untimely hour, letters from the Squire and the Squire's father and grandfather,—altogether a very pretty collection of curiosities. And then the linen—why, there was enough to start a small hotel with! The very recollection of the linen, soft and white and thick to the touch, made Minnie's eyes glisten with pleasure. Surely the Forbes family had never possessed such linen! No; it was becoming clearer day by day to Minnie Fletcher that her duty to the family demanded the sacrifice of young Forbes. After all, he was a stranger, and Giles was one of themselves. Giles was a good, affectionate boy; she could surely turn him, and mould him, and make a good man of him.

So Minnie's thoughts flew on, while the knitting-needles clacked and seemed to cry Godspeed to Giles Fletcher. And just at that moment the door quietly opened, and a white face peered in. Minnie had heard no sound, but the draught made the candle gutter and smoke, and she turned towards the door and saw Giles looking in.

The light was dim, it was now quite dark outside, and Minnie had not observed the terror in the young man's eyes.

"Come in, Giles, if you will. John is painting

the boat, and Aunt Bessie is away for an hour, so we can have—— Mercy on us! Boy, what's the matter?"

"Nothing—nothing!" stammered Giles, resting a hand on the table, and trying to smile.

"Nothing? Then why are you out of breath? Why is your collar torn and your waistcoat unbuttoned? Giles! you have been after the Squire's game again."

"No, Minnie darling. I have promised you not to do that again, you know. The fact is, I had strolled into the Jolly-boats to hear the news, and one of the chaps there had been taking too much and got noisy, and I helped to put him out. I didn't know he had torn my collar, though. Is it much amiss?"

"The button's gone, and you've no neck-tie."

"Has my neck-tie gone—clean gone?" said Giles, trying hard to conceal the agitation which he felt. For it struck him at once that if his neck-tie was found near old George, he ran a rare risk of being hanged.

Minnie had got out needle and thread, and began at once to sew on a new button. Her nimble fingers touched his throat, her sweet face was close to his; but Giles, with ashy cheeks and lack-lustre eye, felt no thrill of pleasure. His heart was sick and faint with a deadly fear.

Minnie tried to rally him, never suspecting what coward hue it was that veiled the natural ruddiness of his cheek. When she had finished her task, she pinched his cheek, and said—

"There, foolish boy; that's done, and never a poor 'Thank you,' not a word, not even the ghost of a smile to reward me for my pains. What is it, Giles? Are you ill?"

"No; but I have had a fall—running in the dark,

you know,—and I feel shaken. My dear, sweet Minnie, I wish I were more worthy to be your lover. You don't know how bad I am! Oh dear! oh dear!"

Giles had sunk down with a heavy sigh, and buried his face in his hands.

Minnie did then feel alarm. Something serious, she knew, must have happened to unman Giles Fletcher.

"What shall I get you, Giles? You seem faint."

"Have you a drop of brandy in the house?"

"I fear we haven't; but I will run over to the Crab and get you a little. Sit you down in Aunt Bessie's armchair. I won't be many minutes gone."

In a trice Minnie had put her shawl over her head and tripped up the street. Giles lay back and groaned. The fall had shaken him, but the fear of the hangman was clutching at his heart, and had taken all the power out of his legs. He could not have left the village that night, even if his resolution had been taken so to do; he felt utterly prostrated by anxiety and craven fear.

There was a snick, the front-door latch went up. Minnie must have been very quick. No, it was Aunt Bessie; he could hear her muttering to herself. She came in, looking rather haggard and wild.

"What! thou, Giles Fletcher! Thou here! Let me see thee, lad; let me look thee full i' the face. Ha! God ha' mercy on thy sinful career; it is as I knew it was."

"What's the matter, Aunt Bessie?" asked Giles, with staring eyes; "and why do you speak so strange?"

"Because I have seen strange things to-night, lad. Where is thy red-and-white neck-tie gone to? Where is it? Whose clammy hand clutches it? Ha! ha! I thought I could get thee out of my

chair fast enough, lad. Now, thou hast a queer feeling about the roots o' thy hair, hasn't tha'?"

"Aunt Bessie," said Giles, with quivering lip, "for Heaven's sake don't talk so loud, but sit thee down and tell me what makes thee so wild to-night, —quick, afore Minnie comes back; and—mind! not a word to her."

"Oh, if Minnie is coming in, let us be gone at once, for I have sum'mut to say to thee, Giles, and very like thou wouldst not quite like her to hear every word on it. We had better go to your mother's house: she be not in the kitchen, as I know; for I called there just now."

It was but a few steps to Mrs. Fletcher's house. The kitchen was empty, save for a black cat that sat glaring into the dark by the fire. The light shone fitfully from the grate, and ever and anon lit up transient flashes and scintillations from burnished bowl and polished saucer round the darkened walls, while the next moment all was mirk and sombre and gloom—all except the large eyes of the black cat, which shone like two yellow night-lights that had been left by the fender and forgotten.

"Sit thee down, Giles, and bide quiet while I speak."

Aunt Bessie poked the fire, and, when a bright light streamed on Giles's pale face and parted lips, she began suddenly—

"Why didst thou push yonder old man over the cliff?"

It was no use for Giles to deny now; she must have seen it, or she could not have asked that question: nevertheless, his tongue clave to his mouth, and he could answer nothing.

"Tell me why thou didst it, Giles, or I will go straight to the police and give evidence that will hang thee."

"He threatened me; I did it in self-defence. He was mad drunk. I'll swear a solemn oath I had no grudge against him; it was all of a sudden-like. He was over the edge and twirling round like a loose rope before I knew what was up. But how did you see it? and what's that you said just now about my neck-tie and George's clammy hand?"

Aunt Bessie, as she stood up, tall and silent by the fire, seemed to be lost in thought. The ticking of the eight-day clock sounded very loud to Giles, as he strained his attention and trembled and shivered with anxious fear.

"Giles, I might to-day have saved thee from the gallows; but I remembered thou used to make fun of me going down to meet my poor husband on the stones yonder, and I never forget those who sneer at my hope, my only joy in life." Aunt Bessie's eyes glowed like fire opposite to the cat's. "No, thou need na make excuses, nor thou need na try to get up and run down to pluck tha' neck-tie from old George's grasp. It's too late, I tell thee."

Giles fell back with a groan.

"It's too late for that now. This is how it was, lad. I was coming home under the cliff, when I see a bundle of clothes on the stones above high-water mark. I goes up, and finds it look like a man bunched up all of a heap. 'Who's yon,' I says, 'as has fallen over the cliff?' So I takes out my matchbox, and strikes a match—out goes the match in the wind; this time, thinks I, we'll be more careful with our matches, so I goes to windward and spreads out my dress a little—like this—and stoops to light my second match. It was old George, sure enough; his eyes open, but I reckon he didn't see me. When I lifted him a bit, his head fell over sideways, as if his neck-bone had been drawn out, poor fellow. Well, Giles, I didn't turn at the sight

o' the dead man; for I've seen too many in my time, some hardly knowable, what with limpets and crabs and seaweed, and their faces cut about with the cruel banging against the flints at the bottom. Ah! and they want me to think and believe that my darling is like one of those! Do you want to make me an unbeliever, Giles Fletcher? Well, I should be if I could think God would be so cruel as to let me get made a wife in the morn and a widow in the afternoon. No, no! My darling is what he shows himself in my dreams, and I thank God that he keeps me in mind of what he looked like. Let me see; where was I, Giles, where was I?"

"You had lit the second match and seen George's face."

"No, that wasn't it; there was something else in my mind, which has clean gone. I can't get hold of it, nohow; it dodges me like the shadow of a cloud on the sea, and hides behind the memory of my dear, lost husband."

"You said the sight didn't make you turn queer."

"Ah! that was it; now I have it again: there was something else, though, which gave me a fine start, and I lit a third match to make sure. Oh, Giles, when I saw thy neck-tie gripped in the dead hand, I turned to stone. 'And is it come to this?' I said; 'has Giles Fletcher done to death this poor old man? Giles Fletcher, that used to run and kiss me with his innocent baby lips? Giles Fletcher, that seemed the pride of all our kin? Giles Fletcher, that Minnie loves too well?"

Giles groaned, and bit his lip, then faltered out—

"You didn't leave that neck-tie yonder, Aunt Bessie?"

"Why should I bring it away, Giles? Thou hast mocked me these five years and more, and now

it is my turn to mock thee, thou sinful, godless lad. Nay, struggle not to leave thy seat. What, thou wilt?"

"I must go and get my neck-tie, I tell you."

"Then go, Giles Fletcher; go, and run into the arms of the policeman, if thou art fool enough."

"Then what am I to do? Oh, have some mercy on me!"

"What mercy hadst thou on poor George? Thou hast given way to temptation, and shalt have thy reward. Know now, Giles, that one sin leads to another. No man can commit an only sin and say, 'There I stop!' The devil will hook that man by the nose, and lead him on and on till—— Who's that coming? See, they are running into the town end; they have found the body, like enough. Go thou and mix quietly with the throng, as if thy heart was as innocent as it was ten year back."

"But that neck-tie?"

"Am I not a Fletcher, too? No, lad, I was not going to let thee swing for it. I have ta'en it from the dead fingers, and hidden it away, safe. Go, lad."

"Aunt Bessie, you have saved my life."

"Thy life? maybe I have; but thy soul? no! It's only thyself can save that, along wi' thou knowest who. Lad, thy life is a sorry, short span; but thy soul's life—how long shall that be? and which is most worth saving?"

"Aunt Bessie, you shall see me a changed man from this night. I have had a terrible lesson. I will turn over a new leaf—see if I don't."

"God help thee, my poor lad! God help thee! Now go."

As Giles mingled with the throng of gaping villagers, Aunt Bessie drew from her pocket the neck-tie, muttering to herself as she folded it up in some soft paper—

"Poor lad, it may have been an accident—not meant, I should say; and he was finely distressed. I was right to give him a fright, though, and I will keep this bit o' stuff to hold him to his purpose. But who comes here? Well, if it isn't Minnie!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FIT OF REMORSE.

MINNIE peeped in, and cried softly, "Is any one there?"

"Yes; but what are all the folk running yonder for?"

"Oh! is that you, Aunt Bessie? Something has happened; somebody has fallen over the cliff, and they have taken his body to the lifeboat house."

"Dear me! and what brings you here?"

"I came to see if—if Giles had come here. I left him in our house looking faint and ill; then, when I went out to get him some brandy, he went away."

"What had made him ill, Minnie?"

A bad fall he had, running in the dark. But where can he be? I feel quite puzzled about him."

"I wish you wouldn't trouble your head about him, Minnie. You can do better than marry Giles. Mark my words, if you become the wife of Giles Fletcher, you will bitterly repent it. That's my piece of advice, and I shouldn't say it if I didn't think it ought to be said."

"I suppose I ought to thank you; but I don't feel like it. I think that every girl knows her own duty best, and, if she makes a mistake, she has only herself to blame."

"You are as obstinate as a Norfolk donkey, Minnie; and that's saying a good deal."

"Then, if you knew I was like that, why did you offer your bit of advice? I mean to marry Giles now, just to spite you. I shall marry him and be happy in spite of you."

"Don't be too sure, Miss Minnie Fletcher. I can stop your wedding by holding up a finger if I like."

"Pooh! one would think you were a witch, to hear you talk."

"You are mocking me about my lost darling, now; and that is an insult I will never endure. I shall go home, and I advise you to stay here till Giles or his mother comes back. You can then propose to get married at once, if your frock is ready, you know."

Aunt Bessie sailed out of the room with this parting shot, while Minnie sank into the armchair.

She began to feel very miserable now that she was alone. She was uneasy about Giles to-night, and his manner had been very unnatural. Either he had been drinking, or some serious trouble had shaken his nerve.

But what business had folk to come shaking their heads and offering their cheap wisdom to her about marriage? She had strong views about freedom of choice, had Minnie. It was a piece of impertinence in Aunt Bessie, who had had barely three hours' experience of married life, to dictate to her whom she should love and whom she should avoid. "Any girl who respects herself," said Minnie, fixing her large, lustrous eyes upon the crumbling fire,

"any girl in my position would obey her own heart." Wilful? not a bit of it! At her age she had a right to choose for herself. As thus she fortified her desires by argument, Mrs. Fletcher, Giles's mother, entered the cottage.

A fine, buxom woman she was, possessing the fine hair and eyes of the Fletcher family—for she had been born a Fletcher herself,—and endowed with a deep-toned voice. Minnie rose to greet her, saying—

"I came in here a while ago, Mrs. Fletcher, and thought I would stay till you came back."

"Have you not heard the news? Old George, the hedger, has gone and fallen over the cliff and killed hisself."

"Old George, is it? I heard some one had happened with an accident, but didn't know who. Old George? then I'll warrant he had been drinking hard. But where is your son?"

"I met him in the town a while ago, going to see the body."

"Ha!" said Minnie, with a little toss of her head, "I don't call that manners to go away like that."

"What has Giles done now, I wonder? Surely you don't go for to blame him because he has run with the rest to see the last of poor George! You're too exacting, Minnie Fletcher."

"Perhaps I am; but when a lad comes in, fainting almost, and cries for a drop o' brandy, and you run down the street to fetch him a glass, and when you get in you find he has gone gaping and gorming with the rest of 'em—well, I don't call that manners. I don't know whether you do?"

Mrs. Fletcher sat listening open-mouthed—Giles had run in, almost fainting, just after that cliff business! That made the thoughts trot through her

brain so fast, made them jostle so confusedly with remembered words and deeds in Giles's recent life-history, and call up such terrible, dark suspicions, that she could find no words.

"Perhaps," said Minnie, "the thought of an old drunkard falling over the cliff makes you forget your son's illness. That he was ill, I am certain; and, to tell you the truth, I feared he had been giving the keepers a chase. But he told me it was not so—he had had a fall when running. Now, Giles has never told me a lie yet," concluded Minnie, "and I think I know an honest face when I see one."

Mrs. Fletcher quietly wished she could have said the same, and merely remarked—

"Lor', Minnie, you make out Giles to be faint and ill; why, I should be real scared if I had not seen him just now looking as hearty as ever I saw him."

"Then I shall trouble you to pay for the brandy, Mrs. Fletcher," said Minnie, with a laugh; "perhaps you'll keep it against the next time Giles feel faint."

Just then Giles returned, and Minnie began at once—

"You're a nice sort of young man—you are! I left you next door to a dead faint, and when I came home you had gone out to see all the sights."

"Don't talk like that, Minnie," said Giles, in a low tone. "Poor old George has thrown himself off the cliff, and I've just seen him lying as peaceful as a child. Hang me, if I didn't feel sorry when I saw him like that! Death makes one stop a bit, and think on what life is, and what we're here for. I don't like to hear you talk like that, Minnie."

Minnie made no reply, but Giles had touched her heart by this unexpected note of sentiment. "After all," she said to herself, "he has the making of a

good man in him ; and as for his finding fault with me, why, I thoroughly deserved it, and he has every right to preach to me."

"What did folks say?" asked Mrs. Fletcher. "Did they think he had done it himself?"

"Oh yes ; there was no doubt on it. I myself saw him drunk at the Jolly-boats, and he went out reeling all over, like a smack with too much sail on."

"Poor George! his old woman will miss him sadly. She have lost all her boys now, and her old man went to-day. What will she do, Giles?"

"Well, mother, if you're agreeable, I'll help her a bit off and on. George and I have been old chums ever so long."

Mrs. Fletcher had by this time lit the lamp and put it down on the table, and Minnie looked up admiringly into Giles's eyes, which just now were softened with the tear of sympathy. He did, indeed, look the picture of a noble lad, and she made ready to worship the image which his remorse and sentiment had set up.

"Leastways," said Giles, "if Minnie does not object ; for I hope we may count her almost as one of ourselves."

"Get along with you, do," said Minnie, as Giles pretended to put his arm round her waist ; Mrs. Fletcher saying—

"Ah, Minnie, I should like nothing better. You know that."

"Some folk would growl, though, if I said 'Yes.'"

Giles had by this time clasped her hand in his. She did not draw it away ; and Mrs. Fletcher thought it prudent to go apart, and rattle the cups in the back kitchen.

Minnie's hand felt soft and warm as it nestled in the nervous grasp of the hand that had so lately

dragged an old chum to the cliff edge. Giles sat still and enjoyed the sensation for a few minutes.

This, he felt, was better work than that other. He began to wish his hands had been cleaner, his conscience less uneasy. Minnie seemed to him like an angel of innocence, calling him away from the evil courses of his youth. How much pleasanter, after all, would be a life of respectability with Minnie! There would be less adventure, no doubt; but no more prickings of conscience, no more panics and dread of justice. He had had a taste of hell in this last hour, which he would fain forget in a new life.

There was still a good deal of selfishness in Giles's highest aspirations; he was still seeking for what would be best and most pleasant to himself. He did not hate the sin he had done; he only hated the disagreeable consequences, and feared the penalty that might follow.

To be sure, he had never intended to murder poor George. George had forced him to it, he kept on saying to himself; yes, he had forced him to it—there was no doubt of that.

"Well, silly boy, what are you thinking of, that you can't say a word to me?" asked Minnie at last.

"Oh, Minnie! I have been turning over in my mind all the bad things I have done. The sight of George has made me take stock, as you may say. I find I am badly on the wrong side; but I can't pay up unless I have time. I want somebody to back me up or I shall go regular broke, and the devil will wind up my affairs."

"Lor,' lad, how you do talk! I suppose you're a bit ashamed of your naughty ways, and try to cover it up with a parable?"

"That's it, sweetheart, that's it! I am terrible

sorry and shamed of the disgrace I have been to my friends. I'd give anything to be able to lead a new life. What's that noise?"

"Only your mother putting things tidy yonder. How scared and nervous you are to-night!"

"Yes, I've had a call, I think. I wonder if this is how folk feel when they're going to get converted?"

"My dear boy, I wish you were always like this; always as sober and Godfearing, then I should have no fears. Giles, I expect you never were nearer heaven than you are to-night."

Giles shuddered. Minnie's last remark shocked him so much that he actually shivered with terror.

"Why, bless me, you're all of a tremble, now! Sure, you haven't caught a cold, or a fever, or something?"

"No, sweet lass, I have no sickness except what you can cure."

Minnie smiled, and shook her head, saying, "Ah! if I could cure you, I would; but what if, instead of curing you, I learnt from you to do wrong?"

"I should deserve everlasting torment if I made you worse by living with you. Minnie, my darling, I worship you; I look up to you as I would to an angel. When I am with you I feel a better lad, I begin to desire to do what is right. Oh, Minnie! when will you let me call you my own dear wife? When will you return my love?"

Minnie turned her face away, and a shining tear slid down her cheek. She was pitying Giles now; she had loved him for many a month, in spite of her better reason.

He put his arm round her, and drew her gently to him; but the thought of the innocent girl yielding to his love with such trustfulness made him feel

more keenly than before how utterly unworthy he was to have the keeping of so bright a jewel.

Shortly afterwards, Mrs. Fletcher entered the room, and, laughing, said—

"Oh, dear me! and when is it to be?"

"Next month, mother," replied Giles, with a radiant face and triumphant tone.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE STRANGER.

THREE weeks or more had gone by, and the spring had come, with cold airs from the east and hot sunshine and cloudless skies. The larks were singing in the blue, the wind grew more mellow, the gorse sprang into bloom, the blue heart'sease nestled in the grass; all Nature seemed full of song and thanksgiving and gladsome activity.

But events were not falling out kindly for the simple folk of Upper Beckthorp. A calamity had come with the blustering winds of spring—a calamity founded in the sinfulness of human nature, not in the recklessness of Nature's grinding laws.

Jean Forbes was in her little garden, not sowing peas and spinach, as had been her wont, but listlessly raking the weeds and tidying up the beds with many a sigh. As she raked, she was aware of a stranger leaning over the gate, and watching her; but still she never lifted her eyes. Her heart was very full, and she did not want to talk.

"Good morning, miss."

"Good morning, sir."

Jean looked up, and saw a strong-built man,

dressed in a grey suit, lifting his hat to her. She came forward a pace or two.

"Can I help you, sir?"

"Yes, I think you can, miss. Does Mr. Forbes live here?"

"Yes, at present he does," replied Jean, with a sigh.

"Oh, excuse me for seeming curious, but the fact is, that I have not been in these parts for some time, and I am rather at sea, and bothered what to do about my friends here."

A look of sadness came into the man's honest face, which quite melted away all Jean's Scotch reserve.

"Anything I can do to help you, sir, I will gladly do."

"Come, that's spoken out frankly! Be you Mr. Forbes's daughter grown-up? Well, I never! Why, I've seen you often playing at the beck when you were a little girl."

Jean smiled, and tried to guess who the stranger could be. "Come in, sir, and sit down. Mr. Forbes will be in soon."

"Thank you; I have walked a goodish bit this morning, and I feel a bit tired. I am more used to riding than walking. What's this? oat-cake, as I'm alive! Thank you, Miss Forbes."

Jean set before her guest a glass of milk, taking note of such facts as met her eye: age about forty or forty-five; hands large but clean; a gold watch-chain and ring; clothes—a well-fitting suit of tweed. She was puzzled; he was not a gentleman quite, by his speech and look, but he was evidently well-to-do. He ate a while in silence, then asked—

"You said Mr. Forbes lived here at present. Is he going, then?"

"Ah, sir, you may not have heard the heavy loss we have met with in the death of the Squire."

"No, indeed ; I have only just returned to England."

"He was so good to the folk, and always thought how he could bring prosperity and happiness to others. We never knew what he was worth, till we lost him."

"Aye, that's often the case. I wonder if—— But no ; I beg your pardon, miss. Tell me some more about the place."

"Mr. Aubrey has come into the estate—a very different sort of person from his father, fond of fast company and racing ; and they do say that he gambles, and is already heavily in debt."

The stranger whistled a low, long note, and looked at his boots.

"Unfortunately, sir, he has a grudge against Mr. Forbes, and we have notice to leave very shortly." Jean wiped a tear from the corner of her eye.

"I reckon you like this place, the beck where you've played, and the folk you know so well."

"Yes ; it is like pulling you up by the roots. It is hard to be turned away for no fault, too. However, there's many more shall feel the pinch as well as we, so I must not be selfish over it. And, perhaps, when we're gone, others will get their turn ; for they say the new Squire is going to keep racing horses, and he is to build a lot of new stables. He has given notice to the village club that he shall want their premises, so I expect there won't be any club after this. 'Tis a pity, for it kept many a man from the drink."

"The whole village is going to the bad, it seems, through the folly of one man. What does the parson say about it ?"

"Oh, he is very indignant, and has done his best

to turn Mr. Aubrey from his purpose; but, faith! you might as well expect to get water out of a well by tickling the pump handle."

"There's one thing, Miss Forbes—that young fool will be bust out, and sold up, in less than fifteen years; but, meanwhile, you and many others will have gone to the wall. Well, in our parts they say sometimes, 'The old country is played out.' You'll have to learn something from us yet, I reckon, if you want to keep on an even keel. It's these old feudal notions that will lead to cutting of throats by-and-by; for a Squire is a mighty engine for good, if he be a good one——"

"Yes, sir, that he is," said Jean, with glistening eye.

"But if he be a bad man, he can do almost any wrong he likes; no one dare say to him, 'Bail up!'"

"No, sir," replied Jean, a little puzzled. Then, seeing her brother coming over the plank bridge, "Here's Mr. Forbes coming."

The stranger glanced at Angus a moment, and said hurriedly—

"No; that's not the man anyhow."

"Angus, here is a gentleman who knows you."

"Glad to see you, sir. I am sorry I forget your face just now."

"There must be some mistake; the man I knew was older than you by thirty years or so."

"Ah! you mean my father? He's dead, sir."

"Your father! How time goes, to be sure! But he was a strong, well set up man; I should have thought he would have lasted longer than that."

"So he would, if they would have given him fair play. My father was shot by poachers from behind."

"Well, I am taken aback! I beg your pardon, Mr. Forbes, for bringing up old troubles. I am real

sorry to hear it. Shot! and in this civilized, Christian England! Why, we don't often do things like that out in the bush!"

"Are you living in Australia, sir?"

"Yes; I have been there the last year. A fine country. But I am keeping you. I am bound for Nether Beckthorp."

"Come in, and take a bit of bread and cheese with us, if you will. I want to hear something about Australia very much."

The stranger accepted the invitation, and, during the meal, gave Angus a good deal of information about the sort of life they lived out in the bush. At last he said—

"Look here, Mr. Forbes. I'll make you an offer fair and square. I want a good, honest fellow to help me in stock driving. I'll take you and your sister over free of expense, and give you such a share in the run as shall enable you to save money for your old age."

"Well, now; that's very kind in you, being, as you are, quite a stranger."

The Scotch caution was evident enough in the tone of the keeper's voice, and the Australian at once broke in with a laugh—

"Ah! a pig in a poke, I see. But, if you will allow me to say so, I am no stranger at all, but a Norfolk man, born and bred in these parts. I see you wondering and inquiring. I must tell you something about myself, if you are to trust your fortunes to my word; of course, that's only right."

"Quite so," replied Angus; "Australia is a long way off, and we must know something of one another before we strike a bargain."

"My story will sound a little like a tale in a book, but I will begin by laying down my nuggets. Here's my letters of introduction."

The Australian pulled from his breast pocket a bulky pocket-book, from which he took a handful of bank-notes, and some gold, and spread them out round his plate, smoothing the notes out carefully.

Angus and Jean exchanged looks, and smiled.

"This is my first letter of introduction, sir; for further particulars I refer you to my temporary bankers in London. Here's their card, which I will ask you to keep."

"Yes; it's all right," said Angus: "but please take up the coins and notes, or little Willie will be playing chuck-farthing with them."

"Well, my friends, now you have seen a specimen of my nuggets, I will tell you that when I left England I had only a few pounds in my pocket. You will think I must have worked hard to buy a run—a sheep-run in the bush costs a many thousand pounds, you know. Well, this was how it turned out. On the ship out was an elderly man, whom I got to know well; it was a sailing ship, and he was taking the voyage for his health, you see. Off the north coast of Australia we fell in with a storm which drove us miles away out of our course, and at last stranded us on a bleak island not far from New Guinea. The ship broke up, and there we were—fast by the heels. No vessels passed our way, we had only a small boat left to do coasting voyages with. Most of the crew were drowned. I got the Australian gentleman on to a spar, and so safe ashore. There were four others saved with us.'

"Had you any food along with you?"

"Well, yes. As the ship broke up, there came casks and that sort, mostly damaged by the salt water; but it served us while we looked about us. Very hot it was, I can tell you; and we had soon to fend for ourselves, fishing and bird-catching, and grubbing for roots and such-like. Then we met some

natives, who gave us some corn, so we knew we were safe for next year. How long were we there? Close upon thirteen year, and mighty glad when a schooner put in to look for water. The old gentleman had aged very much with the hard living and bad fare, though I had shielded him as well as I could. He bribed the captain to take us to Melbourne, and then, after giving our mates on the island a handsome present, he took me up country to his run. I stayed with him till he died, and on his deathbed he gave me a paper. It was his will. He had left me a partner in the run, to take half the profits!

"I stayed on a few months, and then I couldn't wait any longer. You see, all that time on the island I could not send word to my people at home; and after fifteen years had gone, I was afraid to write to my wife, lest she should have taken another husband. So I determined to come over quietly, unbeknown, and see for myself. I have been to my brother's farm, and find he is dead, and the place has changed hands, and now I have come on a more delicate business. If she's dead, please don't tell me straight out. If she's got married again, only let me know before I leave the lodge, and I'll slip off quietly back to London again. Poor Bess, I would not give her pain."

"Not Bessie Fletcher, surely!" cried Jean, excitedly.

"Yes, that's the name. I was carried out to sea on the very day I married her, and picked up by a vessel from Hull. Excuse me," he suddenly interrupted himself, and, rising, went to look out of the door, wiping his forehead with his handkerchief, and leaning against the door-post.

"Jean, go and put him out of his misery," said Angus.

Jean followed him, and touched him on the shoulder.

"She is alive, and she has not married again."

"Thank the Lord for His great kindness to me!" murmured the Australian, and pressed Jean's hand warmly.

"But—but——" Jean hesitated to go on.

"Ah! there is something I ought to hear? Come and tell me in the garden. I can bear it better there."

There was a rustic seat at the end of the garden under an evergreen; here they sat and talked about Aunt Bessie.

"When you were lost, everybody believed you had been drowned, except your wife; she stuck to it that you would come back."

"Did she? God bless her!"

"Time went on, and still there was no tidings of you. The more folk said you were dead, the more Bessie vowed you were alive. She said she had visions of your coming in the night, so that some said she had gone off her head in her grief."

"Tell me; is she mad? Is she stark, raving mad?"

"No, no; but when she is talking quite sanely about something else, she will change suddenly and speak about your coming. She is quite in her senses, except that she would believe you were coming to her in a small boat over the sea."

"But, Miss Forbes, I don't see any madness here, except in yon other folk who would believe I was drowned."

They both laughed, and Mr. Brown, the Australian, went on.

"And I'll prove you all mad to the letter. I will come back to her in a little boat over the sea. How can it best be done?"

"Oh, sir, that would be easy; for your wife goes every afternoon down to the town-end, and looks over the sea for you."

"All right; then, I'll take a boat off the beach before she comes, and you must promise not to say a word of it to any one. Perhaps the manner of my coming may be good for her state of mind. Poor Bessie, thou hast been faithful to my memory all these years! Tell me, is she much altered?"

"You must not expect to find her young and beautiful as you left her: suffering has left its mark on her; her eyes have at times a wild, haggard look."

"Her face!" The stranger shut his eyes, and spoke softly to himself, "Ah, how well I remember her face! I see you, Bessie, standing by the altar, tall and stately, your black hair and pale face, your pretty rosebud mouth and glancing eyes. I promised to take care of you, Bessie; God has given me an opportunity now, and I am ready to do my duty, though you should look wildly on me and know me not. Oh, Miss Forbes, I am terribly excited! What do you think? Can she bear the shock of seeing me?"

"I think so. Perhaps to come as she expects you would lead her mind back again. There is a doctor living here now. Would it be good to consult him?"

"Very wise. I will call and see him. Meanwhile, let no one but your brother hear of my arrival."

Aunt Bessie's husband took leave of Jean and her brother, getting from them a promise to come and meet him after four o'clock.

CHAPTER XX.

THE BOAT RETURNS.

"WELL, Jean, who would have known that that burly fellow was Mr. Brown who was drowned so many years ago?"

"There's no fear of his being recognized," said Jean.

"What do you think about going to Australia, Jean?"

"I should like nothing better; and it would be very good for you to have entire change of scene, and see some new people. You're looking fagged, Angus."

"Perhaps a change would be good," said her brother, dreamily.

"Don't take on so about Minnie," said Jean, clasping her brother by the arm affectionately; "she is to be married in a few days, and you must try and forget her."

"Forget her? Easily said! Well, perhaps it would be best to get away out of the country; for if I stay where I can hear of her being ill-used or in distress, I might do something in haste which I should be sorry for."

"It seems a fine offer, Angus, and a kind and generous offer."

"It is all that. So many things are happening now, I get quite flustered. I ought to have thanked him more than I did; but it all came so sudden upon one."

"He must be rich, Angus; and out there we shall be more free and equal than we are ever like to be in England."

"You little radical! Surely father and mother were very happy as servants to the Squire; so were we till he died."

"Yes, Angus, but now we've got to go; and as we are both strong and full of work, I say, 'Let us go to Australia.'"

They went on discussing the new scheme with fresh hope; for their sudden dismissal had given them both a great shock.

When Angus took his gun about one o'clock, he said, as he left the lodge—

"I will be down by the sea after four. We must back him up all we can, and I'm very curious to see how the poor thing takes it."

Mr. Brown, on reaching Nether Beckthorp, went to the hotel, and ordered a private sitting-room and a bedroom; he then strolled on to the beach, and engaged a boat for a sail, taking with him the small black bag with which he had arrived.

About four o'clock, Jean Forbes called upon Aunt Bessie, and found her alone in the house; she was even then setting out the tea-things for her lost husband, with no less faith than she had set them out fifteen years before. There was the silver cream-jug, in its case, a wedding present as bright as ever it had been; the china tea-pot, to be stirred with Ceylon tea; the muffin-dish, empty—for faith did not

demand a perpetual outlay of muffins ; and one cup bigger than the rest, for *him.*

"Good afternoon, Aunt Bessie. I thought I should be in time to catch you before you went out," said Jean, cheerily.

"Yes, come in, do, and have a cup of tea with us afterwards—that is, if he should come to-day."

"Thank you, I will come in, if you want me ; but if he does come to-day, Aunt Bessie, I think you may want to have him to yourself: it's a long while since you met, remember."

Mrs. Brown glanced sharply at Jean's face.

"Ah! Miss Forbes, I have never known you make fun of me yet. No, I can see by your eyes you speak in earnest. Why, bless me, if you haven't got tears in 'em!"

"Dear Aunt Bessie, when I think of all your sweet patience and perseverance, and love for him you have lost, I can't help feeling that God will reward you some day."

"I have not the least doubt of it myself," said the other, raising her black eyes to heaven, and clasping her hands over her bosom ; "though for the last three or four nights my visions have left me. I'm sorry to say I have slept like a baby all night, and have never thought on my poor Harry."

"Ah! you have had some good nights! and you look all the better for it, my dear: your cheeks have some colour, your eyes look quieter, your forehead feels cooler. Perhaps God is going to send him soon, and he wants you to look well."

Aunt Bessie looked in the glass, and smiled.

"Why, I declare you begin to look quite young again!"

"Jean, don't say that ; I know how I have aged. I always have a fever here, in my brain. I have never

shed a tear since that day. Sometimes I think if I could have a good cry I might feel better. What are you going to do now?"

"I'm just doing your hair for you, Aunt Bessie. I always have thought that you might look a little better if it was done my way. There! your face looks quite different now."

Jean kissed Aunt Bessie, who fixed her deep, penetrating eyes upon her, and asked—

"Tell me, Jean, do *you* believe he may come back to me?"

"I never used to believe he would; but your great faith has melted my heart, and, if it has touched mine, may it not have found favour yonder?"

Jean pointed upwards, and Aunt Bessie murmured—

"May the dear Lord be my example, and may the Holy Spirit dwell in our hearts and give us grace to do the will of God!"

Then, when the tea-things had been duly arranged, the two women set out for the town-end.

In the street they met John Fletcher, who smiled a pitying smile as they passed, and nodded familiarly to Jean.

"Shall you be in if I come and have a cup of tea, Mr. Fletcher?" said Jean.

"Why, of course I shall, if you be a coming, miss."

They then strolled towards the sea, Jean nodding here and there to old acquaintances, who murmured to themselves, half in pity—

"There she goes yonder, to meet her drowned husband, poor thing!"

"But what is Jean Forbes doing along with her?"

"Oh, Jean is a very amiable young person, and

she is just humouring Aunt Bessie. It's a mortal shame sending those Forbeses away."

Girls with shawls over their heads were running to the village pump to draw water for the evening tea; but they took no heed of Aunt Bessie, who walked with head erect, her eyes fixed upon the grey haze on the horizon till they stopped at the edge of the cliff—the town-end. The fishing-boats could be seen along shore, some two, some four miles away; and against the sky they could discern the smoke of a passing steamer. An old man in fishing costume stood meditatively looking over the wall, as he smoked his pipe; all at once he took the pipe from his mouth, and pointed seawards.

Jean noticed the gesture, and left the side of her companion.

"I see a small boat coming; do you know anything about it?"

"Yes, I do; I'se got half a crown to pretend I see her hailed by some steamer. What's the little game? Do you know?"

"Yes; but hush! It's to help poor Aunt Bessie."

"Help? it look more like making a fool on her. I'm not a-going to lend myself to no such schemes as that."

"Hark—in your ear!—that's her lost husband in the boat yonder!"

The old fisherman bent double, put both hands on his knees, and said in a subdued giggle—

"Lord! one's as mad as t'other."

"Aunt Bessie," said Jean, returning, "do you see that black sail out yonder?"

"Yes, my dear; it's put me all in a tremble; for, you know, they never go out to sea like that when they're fishing."

"Let us sit down a while on this seat by the

wall; it will be some time before she comes ashore."

"Harry," said Aunt Bessie, "is that boat yonder coming straight in from the offing?"

"She be, missus. I don't rightly know what's up. She should have been fetching up her lobster-pots, like the rest, but she were called out to sea, and now she's a-coming home."

Aunt Bessie got up, and shaded her eyes with both her hands. Soon she began to talk to herself and pace restlessly up and down.

One or two more old men came, and the strange news soon got about that Jean Forbes had gone off her head, and had the same illusions as poor Aunt Bessie.

From cottage to cottage the news spread like fire amongst straw, and in less than ten minutes all the capable women and old men left in Beckthorp had hurried down to see the wonder.

"Yes; there she stands beside Aunt Bessie, poor thing! and it's all along of the new Squire giving them notice to quit."

They did not say anything, but stood a little aloof, whispering and looking out of the corners of their eyes, and nodding their heads. Fortunately, Aunt Bessie was too taken up by watching the sail to notice the unusual crowd and stir; but Jean's face flushed with anger at their idle curiosity, and she went to them once, and said—

"Please don't excite Aunt Bessie. She is very hopeful to-day that he may come, good friends."

No one answered Jean's appeal; they were all so impressed with the idea that Jean had gone mad, that they could only gape and wonder. When she had left them, one old man said—

"She don't talk so very mad, after all said and done."

"No; but did you mark her high colour? There was fever in her cheek," said an old goody; "and I ain't nussed fever for nothing."

"Aye," said a third, "and did you mark her cunning? They're al'ays as cunning as moles—mad folk be,—she never spoke of her own hope and belief, but put it all on poor Aunt Bessie yonder."

"Aye, so she did; so she did. How amazing cunning they mad folk be!"

"Who said Jean Forbes ever believed any such thing?" said the old man who had first expressed his conviction that she spoke sanely.

"I did," said the old man who was first on the scene; "I said the young woman comed up to me, and spoke in a whisper mysterious enough to wake the sheeted dead. Says she, 'It's her husband in yon lugger.'"

The sensation now became intense. Every eye was turned upon poor Jean; so that Aunt Bessie crept down the sea-steps almost without attracting attention.

Jean remained on the top, shielding her eyes from the sun with her hand, so that she did not notice she had been left by Aunt Bessie.

The fisher-folk, their wives and children, now began to press round Jean; and, when she turned, so many peering faces, some panic-stricken, some on the broad grin, met her eye, that she was quite startled.

"Where is Mrs. Brown gone to?" she asked, with some dignity.

"Gone to meet Mr. Brown," said an impudent young urchin, in a mocking tone; whereat everybody laughed, and was relieved.

"You may laugh, if you like," said Jean; "but for my part I am more disposed to cry, when I think

how long that poor body has been waiting patiently for his coming. And now, neighbours, I tell you he has come; so don't vex the poor woman with your jeers, you little boys. Stand aside when he lands and give them room to pass. What are you whispering about? You don't believe it is Mr. Brown? Well, I tell you I have seen him!"

"There now!" "Clean gone out o' her mind!" "A march hare bain't nothink to her!" "Did yer ever see the likes o' that!"

Such, and of such sort, were the muttered exclamations which saluted Jean's ears. From being angry, she became amused.

"It's all right; I am going to have tea with Mr. Brown this afternoon. But do respect Aunt Bess's state of excitement."

"There's a deal o' method in her madness," said one.

"She says it that calm, I'm a'most fit to believe it's true," said another.

And then the crowd laughed again.

But they no longer cast careless, squandering glances on the lugger, which was now near the shore; every eye was fixed upon the boat.

"She's got two men in her yonder."

"Ay, ay, and one on 'em is dressed in a light suit."

"He's holding up summut—a black bag, it looks like."

"It's none o' young Harry Brown, if I be'n't blind; it's a big, fat man."

"Look at Aunt Bessie yonder!"

Mrs. Brown, in this agony of her suspense, had gone down to the water's edge, whither Jean had now followed her.

The poor woman had sunk upon her knees, on

the shingle, and had buried her face in her hands.

Through the breakers came the lugger, with her sail flapping before the wind; now the keel began to grate on the sand and stones; now the stranger lifted his voice, and shouted—

"Bessie, my darling, is that you? Is that you, Bessie?"

Aunt Bessie gave one look at the burly form in the boat's bow; then, with the cry of a hunted hare, she threw up her arms, and fled back to the sea-steps, with wild eyes and incoherent speech.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CEYLON TEA.

THE people on the cliff had been watching intently the course of events. They saw Aunt Bessie's gesture of despair, and her sudden flight from the stranger. They now made way for her in respectful silence, as she came muttering up the stairs.

When she reached the top she looked round with flashing eyes upon the crowd of kinsfolk and acquaintance, and said—

"Shame on ye! to get up a piece of acting like this, to make fun of a poor woman—perhaps a widow; who knows? For I feel a'most as if God Himself had deserted me now."

No one spake, no one dared to make reply to the poor woman in her terrible agony of despair. They felt that she had been cruelly deceived; they were as indignant as she was.

She passed through them, along the street, back to her little house, where the best tea-things were laid out, and the Ceylon tea lay ready in the china tea-pot.

And Mr. Brown!

Well, when Mr. Brown saw the bride of his fond recollections, the dashing brunette, the girl of glancing eyes and laughter-loving mouth turned into a middle-aged woman with a wild eye and haggard face, he felt a bitter disappointment.

Perhaps this showed itself in his face just when his wife was looking eagerly for the husband of her youth; yet, when she turned and made for the cliff, his first impulse was to jump out and overtake her; but he restrained himself, and walked leisurely down a plank which was placed for him.

Jean Forbes was by the edge of the water, perplexity in her eyes.

"Missed fire this time, Miss Forbes. What is to be done now?"

"Come with me. She expects you to tea."

"The dickens she does! Why, how could she——"

"She has laid out tea for you this fifteen year. Come along!"

As Jean and Mr. Brown mounted the sea-stairs, an ominous sound of hissing met their ears.

"What's that mean, Miss Forbes?"

"They think I have been deceiving your wife, and that you are nobody but a stranger after all."

"Is that it? It seems very hard to prove that I am I. Now, my good women, don't any of you remember Harry Brown?"

"You're not Mr. Brown—get along with you, do!"

"Well, I was when I got up this morning and looked in the glass. Of course, I may have got changed at nurse."

The frank, ringing tones made a diversion in his favour, but amongst some laughter there were many murmuring voices.

"What! is there no one here who can remember Harry Brown? What old man is yon with the short pipe? isn't it Bob Fletcher? Come, Bob, is that some of the bird's-eye I gave you to smoke the evening before I was married, when you and I were planning out a new row-boat in Joe's yard yonder?"

"What's that he says?" exclaimed the old man, drawing the pipe slowly from his mouth. And when the words were repeated to him in a shrill key by his grand-daughter, he came and lifted his blear eyes to Mr. Brown's face, uttering an expression of surprise. "Blessed if it ain't you, Master Harry! Well, if this doesn't cap owt! Look ye here, lads and lasses, it's his'n voice."

"Yes, I've got my own voice, but my stomach has got larger with living on roots in a desert island. Good folk, I don't wonder at your unbelief; but I know such a lot of things about you all, and your fathers and mothers, that I am sure I can prove that Harry Brown is Harry Brown, if you'll only give me time."

"Where have you been all this time, Master Harry?"

"I was cast away for thirteen years on an island to the north of Australia. To-morrow, if all goes well with my wife, I will invite a lot of you to supper, and you shall hear all about it. You must excuse me now, for I am rather in trouble about her, as you know. Good-bye, neighbours."

"And God bless you, sir," was the general reply.

"Now, Miss Forbes, I am almost sorry I ever came back. It would be bad enough to know that my wife was dead; it is worse to know she is out of her mind, and can never recognize me."

"She is sometimes, indeed generally, quite reasonable, Mr. Brown. I hope, when she finds

you are really her husband, she will be herself again. You must know that she has had many bitter disappointments, and some of the boys have, out of fun, made believe you were coming. So that it is no wonder she left you as she did."

By this time they were near the house where John Fletcher, with his sister and Mrs. Brown, lived. Jean said—

"Better wait at the gate a few minutes, while I go in and prepare her."

So Jean tapped and entered. She found Mrs. Brown sitting with her arms in her lap, looking listlessly into space.

"Why, Aunt Bessie, this is too bad of you!" said Jean, putting her hand on the woman's shoulder.

Mrs. Brown stared at the kettle, which was hissing merrily on the fire; but she made no reply.

"I have brought him to have tea with you," Jean went on; "he is standing outside now, waiting. Come, Aunt Bessie!"

Still she remained motionless, with dry eyes.

Jean sighed heavily; to think that this poor woman should have delighted so long in a hope that seemed a delusion; and, now that hope had turned to reality, should be incapable of enjoying the hour she had longed for so devoutly!

Outside the house there were voices. Jean went out, and found Minnie talking excitedly to Mr. Brown.

"Oh, Jean Forbes!" she cried; "isn't this a miracle? How does Aunt Bessie feel now? I'm sure I am ready to jump over the moon for joy." And she put her hand on the low stone wall, and vaulted into the garden.

"That's a pretty girl," said Mr. Brown. "That's how my Bessie looked the day we were married—

just so winsome as that. Oh dear! how shall I ever be able to get her back with me to Australia? I'm half sorry I ever returned."

"Come in, Mr. Brown, and speak to her; perhaps she will know your voice, as the old men did yonder."

Then Jean and Mr. Brown entered the room where Aunt Bessie sat, holding the empty tea-pot in her lap, and making no reply to Minnie's flow of words.

"Bessie, my darling, I have come at last; but you don't remember me, I'm afraid," said Mr. Brown.

Aunt Bessie put her head a little aside, as one who listens to catch a tune he thinks he knows.

"Bessie, don't you mind me? Don't you remember Harry Brown? I have been away a long time, dearest, but"—and here her husband knelt beside her and grasped her hand—"they tell me you have been very faithful to me, and have believed I should come back to you again."

Still no reply; but when Minnie broke in with a sob, the poor woman held up her left hand, the first finger being pointed upwards as if she were waiting for some heavenly music, and feared any earthly interruption.

Mr. Brown, seeing her so distraught, and catching in the worn features some resemblance to the pretty maid he had left so many years before, felt a sudden thrill of grief seize him, and he let his head fall in his wife's lap, as he murmured—

"It is hard to bear! God help me!"

"Who is it?" whispered Aunt Bessie, looking wildly round.

Minnie was weeping; Jean came forward, and said—

"The husband you have so long prayed for is kneeling at your knee, and you will not recognize him. God has answered your prayers, and you are still unthankful."

"Oh, my head! my head! It will split. Did you say my husband was coming back? Where is he?"

The strong man was shaken by his feeling, and cried—

"Oh, my poor mad wife, would God you had died!"

"There it is again! It is his voice! What! have I believed so long, only to be faithless at the last? Speak, Harry! Speak again, if it be thy voice indeed."

"My own Bessie," he cried, pulling her face down, till it was close to his. "I am altered, and you don't know my face; but you remember my voice, don't you? And this ring—see! I have kept it all the time, Bessie, darling."

"She is crying! See! the great tears are rolling down her cheeks, Jean," cried Minnie, as she pointed to Aunt Bessie.

The storm which had begun in thunder-drops, ended in a flood of tears and sobs, amongst which they could hear the poor woman cry—

"God forgive me, for my hard heart! God forgive me my want of faith!"

The two young women quietly left the room, and there, in the solitude of their first experience of wedded life, this man and woman learnt the differences and the sameness which time and character had developed within them.

When, ten minutes later, Minnie and Jean re-entered the room, they found Aunt Bessie smiling over the first cup of Ceylon tea she had ever poured out for her husband, while he was talking

with all his might, and making up for the time he had lost.

They both went up and kissed Aunt Bessie.

"Aye, but it's my turn now, lasses," said Mr. Brown; and he inflicted the loudest of Australian bush-ranging smacks on the cheeks of the girls, who took it in mirth and merriment, so glad were they to see Aunt Bessie herself again.

"I feel so much clearer in my head since I have had a good cry," said Aunt Bessie.

"Yes," replied Jean, "you look bright and happy now."

"I should think she does," broke in the Australian. "My Bess says she knew my voice from the first, but she was afraid somebody was imitating me, and trying to take her in. Then she got angry, and hardly knew what she was about, and her head ached. But it's all right now, isn't it, Bess?"

"I hope so; but I'm still rather frightened of you, Harry. You never had that great black beard when I promised to love, honour, and obey you."

"No; I was a better one to look at, but not such a stayer as I am now. Plenty of these where I come from, Bess."

He threw a handful of sovereigns on the table.

"Oh!" cried Aunt Bessie, gathering them up carefully, "we shall soon be in the workhouse, if we begin like that."

"Shall we, Bess? Then, you pocket them up for a rainy day, if you distrust my powers of husbandry!"

"May I? All this heap of gold? Why, there's nine, ten, eleven pound ten chucked down as if it was dirt."

"So it is, lass. Australian dirt is at the bottom

of it. But get your things together; we ought to be moving."

"Moving, Harry? You're surely not going away to-night?"

"I've ordered rooms at the hotel, my dear wife. I have a few letters to write; and while I write, you can sit quiet, and look at me, and wonder if I am Harry or no."

"Not the big hotel yonder, I hope!"

"Why not? Is it not comfortable enough?"

"Oh, Harry! you should have asked some one first. They charge you pounds and pounds! It's only the very first quality that go to the hotel."

"That's what I thought, darling; but I knew you were of the very first quality, so I chose your room carefully. I have asked the price, too, so you won't frighten me. You are to have a private sitting-room, and a snug little fire for seven-and-sixpence a day. Cheap enough!"

"A private sitting-room! Well, I never did!"

Poor Aunt Bessie looked comically bewildered; but her husband kissed her, and said—

"Now, get some things together, and I will send a man to fetch them."

Aunt Bessie went to her room to pack her little stock of clothes and valuables.

Minnie had been busy, putting away the tea-things. Mr. Brown was watching her, and kept saying to himself, "She looks just like my Bess did, bless her." At last he said—

"Well, Miss Minnie, and has no one wanted you yet?"

"Oh yes! I am engaged," said Minnie, rather shyly.

"She is to be married in a few days," said Jean.

"Indeed! Pray, who is the happy man? I must get my wedding present ready, must I not?"

"Harry," said Aunt Bessie, re-entering the room at that instant, "you forget that you should consult me first. I have known Minnie the longest; she has always been very kind and helpful to me, and I should like to give her the best present that can be got."

"And so you shall, Bess; so you shall."

CHAPTER XXII.

NOT QUITE AT HOME.

WHEN Mr. Brown and his wife left the Fletchers' house arm in arm to go to their rooms in the hotel, they found the street thronged with villagers, many of whom pressed forward to shake hands with "the newly married couple," as one old man phrased it. And a hearty cheer sent them on their way rejoicing.

The lady who managed the hotel was so polite to Aunt Bessie that the latter could not forbear saying to her husband—

"I never knew before, Harry, how false the world is. That fine lady would have thought it beneath her to speak to me yesterday; now she is all smiles, and 'I hope we can make you comfortable, Mrs. Brown?' or, 'Is your room to your liking?' Oh, it makes me feel quite angry with her!"

"Ah, Bess, I have learnt that lesson; even out in the bush we have our snobs. But as for England, they are so used to bowing down to lords, that to bow down to gold is quite natural to them. And, I reckon, gold is the lord of the coming century. By-the-by, what present shall we buy

for your young friend, Minnie Fletcher? I admire her fine eyes and pretty colour, and I'm very glad she has behaved so well to you. What shall we do for her, Bess?"

Mrs. Brown's dark eyes sought her husband's face doubtingly; she perused his laughing features, and saw strength and good temper mingled. At length she replied, putting her hand on his, as they sat in the embrasure of a bow window that looked upon the darkening sea—

"Harry, will you do what I wish?"

"Of course I will; a thousand pound, if you like."

"Harry, the best thing we can do for Minnie is to stop her marriage. I want you to do it. You have said you would do what I wish, darling, haven't you?"

Harry Brown gazed into the dark eyes of his wife, as though he were trying to fathom their depth. For the moment he half feared lest some craze were troubling her poor brain; but she looked up at him so trustfully, that he was reassured; he saw just now no gleam of madness in her; his hand pressed her brow—it was cool; she was calm and collected. Yet was he staggered by her request, and doubted what to say.

"Harry, let us think no more of this till to-morrow. I have very good reasons for wishing Minnie to break off with Giles, but to-night I must hear all about yourself. For, if I don't keep hearing about you, and pressing your hand, I shall give over believing you are my Harry."

"Ah, Bess, that would be a pretty kettle of fish! If you were to take it into your head to offer your Ceylon tea to some better-looking chap than I was, I should be bushed, shouldn't I?"

The evening sped on in interesting talk. They

were exchanging confidences—these two elderly lovers; and it was quite extraordinary how the servants of the hotel found some excuse for dropping in to see how things were going.

And the night fell, and the lights were put out, and the sea moaned in the distance just as usual.

But Aunt Bessie cried quietly as she said her prayers; for she had to alter the old form of words she had used so long, and her gratitude ebbed out in tears.

There were callers at the bar quite early next morning, for all the neighbourhood had heard of Aunt Bessie's luck, and were anxious to hear every scrap of news.

The lady manageress was quite excited as she replied to a group of questioners, who stood with elbows on the counter and mouths open.

"Yes, Mr. Smithson, she came in on his arm last evening in her old stuff dress, looking so nice and quiet. Mad? Oh, dear no! not a trace of aberration, I assure you. Well, you know, she never was what you may call mad; it was only after three o'clock in the afternoons that she used to carry on so with her delusions, and her—what? Oh, to be sure! Of course her delusions came true, and our laughing at her (as you say) was—well, I don't call it madness, nor yet delusion, as you seem to think, Mr. Cook; still it's very wonderful, isn't it?"

"How about three o'clock this afternoon, eh?"

"That, sir, is settled. Mr. Brown has sent down to order the Victoria and a couple of horses for a long drive after lunch. Very wise of him, isn't it?"

"Oh, then, he has really got plenty of tin?"

"Well," said the manageress, simpering, and doling out her next words in subdued tones as if they were a delicacy in confidences which she

could only entrust to her nearest friends, "if I may be allowed to express my opinion, I should say Mr. Brown was extremely well off. Last night I went up to her bedroom, to see if the poor thing had every comfort, and she said to me, quite like a little child—so natural, so unaffected, 'Look here,' she said, 'at this beautiful ring my husband has given me;' and she stretched out her poor, thin hand. My word! it nearly made me jump to see it. What was it? why, a cluster of diamonds, all twinkling at you as real as real! I never saw such a ring out of a shop-window before. And she said to me, with tears in her eyes, and her lips all quivering, 'God has been very good to me, hasn't He?' Well, that took away all my envy at once. I flung my arms round her neck, and kissed her; if I hadn't done that, I should have burst out crying."

This recital was received with breathless attention. When the lady stopped, one of the housemaids, who had been listening outside the bar-room, came in, and said—

"Please, ma'am, what am I to do about dusting Mrs. Brown's private sitting-room?"

"What are you to do, Mary? why, dust it of course! You should have done it an hour ago. They will be wanting breakfast soon, I dare say. It's close upon eight now; and poor Mrs. Brown is used to early rising."

The lady manageress could not resist this little slap at rich Mrs. Brown, only yesterday mad Aunt Bessie.

But Mary seemed to have something more to say; for, instead of receiving her reprimand meekly, she smiled all round the bar-room significantly.

"Now, then; what are you simpering about? Did you hear me tell you to go and do that room at once?"

"Yes, ma'am, I did," said Mary, taking out her very dirty handkerchief to laugh into with some show of reluctance; "but she's gone and done it a hour ago." And now Mary fairly exploded into a guffaw.

"Who's done it?" said the manageress, sharply.

"Who? why, Aunt B — I should say, Mrs. Brown."

"No, you don't mean it, Mary!"

"Yes, I do, though. When I went up with my duster, what should I see but the poor thing in her old gown, hard at it. The chairs was all piled in the middle of the room, the windows was flung open, and there she stood a-wiping round the sideboard, like any—— Well, I never see such a sight in a private sitting-room at a big hotel like this—never in all my life."

"What did you do, Mary?"

"I was fairly took aback at first; but I said, says I, 'Oh, Mrs. Brown, I hope you won't demean yourself!' But she broke in, 'Oh yes, I shall; I like it, Mary. Mr. Brown is dozing, and I must be doing something. I feel so queer in this big place, but give me work to do, and I shan't think. I'm too happy, Mary, by half. God has been too good to me, too good; and if I get stuck-up, and behaving as if I was a lady born, He'll very like send my husband off to sea again; and I can't blame Him for it. I should do the same, I know."

"Ah, poor thing, she's mad!" said the manageress.

"Not she," replied Mr. Smithson; "it's my belief she's more sane than the lot of us. I wish I had a man or woman on my farm with half her sense—eh, Cook?"

Mr. Cook slapped the counter with his hat, and said—

"It's what I've been saying all along. Aunt Bess

has a pull over us like this: she takes everything to the Almighty, and makes her friends in the other world; so if she doesn't get what she asks for she bears it patiently, and believes it's for the best. She isn't like other folk, I own. She rambles on to herself. I've met her up on the heath, a-talking away like a good un. I heard her very words: they was a sort of talking prayers—not complaining and whining for blessings, as some folks does, but just pleasant discourse, as if she was confiding her thoughts to a wise and good friend. I can tell you it sent me home thinking, that afternoon. And, ever since, I've stuck up for Aunt Bessie —God bless her!"

"Well, He has that," said another listener.

"There's her bell, Mary. Run quick, will you?"

Mary vanished, and the good folk in the bar-room heard Mrs. Brown's voice, as she stood on the landing of the first floor—

"Oh, Mary, Mr. Brown has rung for some hot water. I'm so sorry he didn't tell me, because I would not have troubled you to get it."

And then they heard the reply—

"Lor', mum, don't speak of it. It's a pleasure to wait on such a nice-mannered gentleman."

"Yes, he is nice-mannered, isn't he, Mary? So different from what I had been expecting all these years—so much fatter too, Mary. But I am keeping you."

These fragments of conversation were slyly relished in the bar-room; and doubtless, if Harry Brown had known how the neighbours were interesting themselves in his doings, he would have given one of his loud and hearty laughs.

Not long after a young man entered the hotel, carrying a long card-board box.

"Who might you want to see?"

"Mrs. Brown, who is staying here, I believe. She telegraphed last evening for some mantles."

"Oh, indeed!" said the manageress. "She does not lose much time. Lucy, go and announce the mantles."

Then turning to the young man, she said—

"And you come from Norwich, I suppose? Yes, I thought so. About what figure?—pretty good ones?"

"The very best we have in stock, ma'am. Telegram said, 'Bring the best you have.' I dare say she is a rich lady."

"She is to-day; yesterday she was a poor, lone widow."

And then the story was told over again, with interruptions, and corrections, and comments from Mr. Smithson, Mr. Cook, from the head waiter and the coast-guard, who had just looked in, and was but barely finished when Lucy came back to say—

"It's as good as a play, mum. Aunt B—I should say, Mrs. Brown—she stopped a-pouring out the coffee, and said, 'I don't expect any mantles, thank you; it must be a mistake!' But Mr. Brown, he lays his knife and fork down, and turns hisself to where I stood, and, says he, with a wink and a nod, says he, 'It's all right, Lucy; trot him upstairs. They're for me, Mrs. Brown. If you can't do with a new mantle, then I must put it on my back.' And he fell to laughing that merry I couldn't help joining in."

"I'd give a shilling to see her face when she opens the box," said the manageress, with a touch of regret in her voice. It did seem rather hard to her just now, that so many earthly blessings were being heaped on the back of this woman, who was, after all, not at all prepared to receive them, or perhaps to appreciate them.

The young man and Lucy went up to the Browns' room, while those below waited rather silently: they would not have liked to say they were listening; but human nature is human nature, especially in out-of-the-way villages.

"You're wanted, mum," said Lucy, excitedly. "She can't decide nohow, and says you must help her."

"Well, I never did!" cried the manageress, dropping her stitches, and rushing to the stairs.

"That's right," said Mr. Brown, as she entered the sitting-room; "now we shall get criticism: when two women get together, you may be sure of faults being found. Mrs. Brown by herself can only say, 'It is too pretty!'"

"I am sure I am only too pleased to lend my poor powers of taste to——"

"Yes, I knew you would be a regular stunner at that sort of thing. You're rather fond of dress yourself, now?"

"Oh, Mr. Brown!" cried the manageress, half pleased and half angry at the soft impeachment.

There lay the mantles on the sofa and on the easy-chairs, inviting criticism and admiration.

"They are too good for me. I should look a Jezebel in such beautiful raiment. My friends would say I was stuck-up and proud, Harry. Do let me wear out my old cloth jacket first—do, Harry!"

"There now! did any one ever see such a contradictious woman? I telegraphed last night for these things in order to please her, and she wants to go on with her old clothes, just to avoid the jealousy of her neighbours! I tell you what it is, Bessie, if you make any more fuss about it, I'll order in a hundred mantles, and dress up the whole village. Why, bless my soul! she won't

believe I can afford to pay for them. Here, Lucy, ring up all the servants. Let's have 'em all in the room. They shall have these mantles."

"What are you thinking of?" cried his wife, opening her large black eyes very wide.

"Oh, I'm not dotty! I know what I'm about, Bess; but, as you say, when a man comes home after he has been thought dead, and finds a good, economical wife waiting for him, he must make an offering of thanksgiving. See! here they come—all grinning; aye, I'll make you grin before the day's out. Now, then, Mrs. Brown, before you select your mantles, I must ask you to give each of these honest people the little gold coin you propose to confer upon them."

"What do you mean, Harry?" asked his bewildered wife.

Whereupon Mr. Brown pulled out his purse, and pouring out a golden shower of half-sovereigns on the white tablecloth, he nodded to his wife, and said—

"It is your present, Bess: one each—and our blessing."

Smiles broke out all round the room, and Mrs. Brown said—

"I am very glad to let you share in this small way in my great happiness; but it is my husband's present, not mine. You know I have nothing to give you but my thanks for your sympathy. Well, if you will accept these golden tokens, I shall be much obliged to you all."

Accept them? I should just think they did! Why, the little sitting-room echoed with "Bless you!" and "Thank you, kindly!" And the young man with the mantles seemed infected by the contagion too, for he grinned from ear to ear, though he had as yet had no mineral in his palm. Yet, when

the servants had gone their way rejoicing, he seriously recalled the company to a criticism of his goods.

"Now, ma'am, here's a black cashmere, trimmed with lace and beaded gimp, which would fit you charmingly."

But the manageress broke in with, "Oh, Mrs. Brown, if I were you, I would take this grey cloth mantle; the gold braid does look so sweet, and the hood—see! it is lined with crimson silk. Oh, what a duck of a mantle, to be sure!"

"I should not dream of wearing one with gold braid; it would be ridiculous in me, would it not, Harry?"

"You shall choose your own, Bess. I only asked Miss Hunter up to give you a fillip; your taste is neat and not gaudy, is it not?"

"It is, darling. I like this black mantle best, Harry; it is neat and quiet. May I have this, darling?"

"Certainly; I admire your choice, Bess: black silk, Spanish lace, I believe? Yes, he says Spanish lace, and trimmed with jet; very quiet and yet good."

The young man rejoined with a smile—

"Oh, sir! it's real Spanish lace; that's the most expensive of all the mantles we have in stock."

"Is it? Oh, I won't have it, then! I couldn't think of it."

"Yes, you could, sweet Bess; the mantle's yours. Put it aside, please, Mr. What's-your-name."

"Oh, Harry, please don't; I really did not know."

"H'm! I'm not so sure of that; you're a bit of a sly puss, after all, I'm thinking. You've carefully picked out the most expensive article, while you were pretending all the time you wanted a cheap thing."

Here Brown rolled about the sofa in agonies of laughter. Mrs. Brown was in a whimsical distress; everybody was laughing. Well, she couldn't hold out against the world, so she laughed too, kissed her husband, and called him "A naughty man; on the high road to ruin." Then they chose a neat mantle for Jean Forbes, and ordered half a dozen pairs of gloves for the manageress. And so they began auspiciously their first day of married life together, forgetting that the joy-bells had pealed so many years ago, forgetting their past troubles in their present bliss.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HOW GILES KEPT HIS WORD.

WHEN Jean Forbes got up in the morning and entered the kitchen, she found her brother sitting by the table; his head was resting on one hand, and he was asleep.

"Ah, poor fellow!" she said to herself; "he has been out all night, and has come home so tired that he has fallen asleep as he sat." And she went quietly about her work, glancing at his face from time to time.

The yellow hair had fallen about his freckled brow; his sleep was disturbed, he even murmured from time to time. Jean opened the window, and in came the fresh morning air, laden with scent of sweet-smelling stocks and old-fashioned wallflower and sweet-brier, and many another flower and shrub.

"Minnie! Minnie!"

Jean paused in her work; the words were pronounced so clearly, and with such sadness of tone, that she felt she must wake the sleeper.

"Angus!" she said, giving her brother a little shake.

"What is it?" the young man asked, awakening

with a start, and staring wildly around. "Oh, Jean, is it you? I must have been dreaming."

"Yes, you were; so I roused you. Go to bed for a few hours, Angus; you give yourself too little sleep."

"There is so much to do now, with all these eggs about."

"I wouldn't be so particular about preserving the eggs. You get no credit for anything you do now."

"Yes, I do, Jeannie. You forget; there is some One who sees me when I do my duty. Oh, I am sleepy!"

The young keeper stretched himself almost from ceiling to floor. As he was leaving the room he turned, and said—

"I have been in temptation, lassie, the night; but, thank God, I have come out clear."

Jean noticed the serious expression in his blue eyes, and said, as she caught his coat with both hands—

"Temptation, Angus? Nothing very bad, I hope?"

"I hardly like to tell you how wicked I have been. The fact is, when I was on my beat last night, I heard low voices quite close to me. One was Harry Bent's, the other was—who do you think? why, Giles Fletcher's! I could have shot him, and saved poor Minnie a life of misery. I seemed, too, to see father's face in the long fern; and oh! I was so tempted to pay him off for that murderous shot in the fir plantation."

"But you didn't, Angus?"

"No, I laid down my gun, and just jumped on his back like a tiger. Harry Bent was off like a hen-grouse, and Giles fell underneath me like an ox at the butcher's; there was no need to throttle him."

"Angus, how your eyes flash! You didn't hurt him?"

"Not much, lassie. I only let him feel I was his master, that was all. 'Giles,' said I, 'you know very well that I could kill you now if I liked.' He groaned, and said something about 'Would I spare him?' 'Yes,' said I, 'on one condition: tell me why you killed my father?' He wouldn't speak; so I said, 'You needn't fear I shall bring you to trouble about it; I'm not that sort. I don't want to see you hanged at Norwich. Minnie Fletcher loves you, and that alone—that, and nothing else, saves your life. So speak the truth, and fear nothing. Why did you kill him, Giles?'"

"'It was a mistake; I never meant to,' he said.

"'Bah!' said I, tightening my grip about his neck; 'tell the truth, or I'll strangle you in the bracken.'

"Then he gasped, and put out his tongue; there was moonlight enough to see it: so I let go a bit, and said, 'Come, lad, tell the truth, and I'll let you go free; but you shall never marry Minnie, mind that; try, and I give you up to justice.'

"He took a minute or two to get his breath back, and looked up at my face the while. Then he whimpered—

"'Don't hurt me, Forbes, and I'll tell you true—I will indeed.'

"I still sat astride him, but I let go of his neck. 'Speak out,' I said, 'and never fear; if it hadn't been for poor Minnie, I'd ha' given you over to justice long ago. I have evidence enough to hang you, Giles; but, though you have murdered my father, I leave the punishment to God, and to your conscience.'

"His eye was on mine all the time I was speaking. I could see he was calculating his chances;

he lay as quiet as a hare that you have surprised in her form, and she lies with her ears back, waiting for the stroke of death, and can't move for the fright o't.

"'Angus Forbes,' says he at last, with a gasp, 'forgive me, if you can: it was you I meant to kill in the fir wood yonder; but in the dark I mistook my man, and shot your poor father by accident. I am very sorry; I never had any grudge against him; he was a good, well-spoken man, and I am real sorry I done it.'

"Jean, lass, when he told me that, half my anger against him was gone; but I asked him why he wanted to kill me.

"'You came between me and Minnie Fletcher; I was mad with jealousy. There! I've told you now! It came upon me all in a moment like. I never meant nothing of the sort, till I heard you talking in the wood. I fired, and it has done me no good—no good! only made me a worse man. So now, kill me, and take your revenge.'

"'No, no, Giles,' said I, quietly. 'I am glad you did not mean to kill poor father; because I have always had a sort o' feeling that it was my duty to do something in satisfaction of his blood; but if it was only me you meant to kill, that's another matter. I know what jealousy is, lad. I could have killed you just now, if I had given way to it. Get up and go home. You will hear no more of this as far as I am concerned. I leave you to the great Judge of all the earth.'

"He got up and staggered to his feet. 'I want to thank you,' he said, in a trembling voice; 'but I feel shaky all over.'

"Well, lass, the upshot was, I had to half carry him through the ling till we got to the sandy lane. I read him a sermon as we went, and I told

him, if he wanted to show his gratitude to me, and repentance for his fault, the best way was to leave off his evil ways, and try and make a happy home for his mother."

Jean had been leaning her forehead against the chimney-piece; she turned and kissed her brother, and a tear stood in her eyes, as she exclaimed—

"Well done, Angus; you have won the finest victory you ever did in your life."

"Do you think so, Jeannie? But it has cost me dear." And the young man sighed, as he rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes.

"I know it has. You love her still, and if she only knew you and Giles—if she knew your hearts as well as she knows your faces, she would not hesitate nor doubt which of the two she ought to marry."

"Well, I'll go and get a bit o' sleep. Don't you tell any one about last night's work, Jean."

When Angus had gone to his room, his sister began revolving plans for informing Minnie more fully about her sweetheart's sinfulness; but she was met by difficulties at every turn. Minnie would indignantly deny the charges; it would be necessary to bring forward the evidence. This might get about, and lead to Giles being hanged; and this conclusion she shrank from with horror. Still, it did seem to her almost wicked to let Giles Fletcher go about unpunished, with that dreadful deed of blood scored against him; and all that morning, as Jean busied herself about her duties, she kept pondering these things in her mind.

As she and Willie sat at breakfast they heard a horse come up the hill, and the sound stopped at their gate. Presently the latch of the garden gate clicked, and the ruddy, smiling face of the head groom at the hotel showed at the open door.

"Good morning, Miss Forbes. I've got a largish parcel for you—and a note."

"Do sit down, Mr. Henderson," said Jean, offering a chair; "it is very good of you to come with it."

Mr. Henderson winked at Willie as he remarked, "Don't know much about that. Mr. Brown yonder—him as was drownded years back, you know—leastways folks thought he ought to ha' been—— H'm! where was I, Miss Forbes?"

Mr. Henderson, having lost the thread of his discourse, was curry-combing his back hair in a pretty despair with the note which he was to deliver.

"You were saying something about Mr. Brown," said Willie.

"So I was—and here it is," he cried, thumping his thigh and fetching out half a crown which he held up for Willie's admiration: "that's something like a gentleman I reckon—that free he is with his gold. Why, we had ten bob all round before breakfast this morning; and says he, 'Just ride up with this parcel, Henderson'—he called me Henderson as pat as if he had known me for years—— Let me see—where was I?"

"'Ride up with this parcel,'" said Willie, laughing.

"Well done, young un! A bright boy, Miss Forbes, and will do you credit some day. I say, Willie, just run out and see if my mare is safe; I tied her to the gate. That's a good boy! Now, Miss Forbes, excuse me asking you again. I didn't like to do it afore that bright boy—he was fit to laugh at me just now—but I get that muddled—could you kindly say—I've partly forgotten—in short, where was I?"

"You were saying that Mr. Brown had asked you to ride up with the parcel," said Jean. "Perhaps, if it really is for me, I had better see what's in it.

And the letter, Mr. Henderson, please, if you don't mind. Thanks ! Now, while I'm reading it, do have a cup of tea."

"Well, no, not this morning, thank you ; I've not tasted tea since I was confirmed."

"Not a confirmed drunkard, I hope?" said Jean, playfully.

"Oh, that's a little too bad," said Mr. Henderson, giggling bashfully, while his nose blushed at such a suggestion ; "it's a little too bad ! But there, now ! you pretty girls can say anything—you know you can."

"Hush, Mr. Henderson, you are a married man."

"I grieve to say I am," he replied, with a sigh, putting his hand to his heart, and winking at the tall eight-day clock, that seemed to stiffen at the indignity. He then laughed, so loudly that Jean was obliged to caution him, lest he should wake her brother.

Willie had returned. "The horse is safe enough, eating the hedge, and—— Oh my ! Jean, what a beautiful cloak you've got, to be sure !"

"It is, Willie. Mr. Brown has sent it for me."

Mr. Henderson got up, and walked round Jean three times, with his head on one side, and a ghost of a hiss seemed to come from his lips, as if he were grooming her in fancy.

"I must run down and thank Aunt Bessie for this," said Jean ; "so I won't keep you waiting."

"But you haven't read the letter," replied Mr. Henderson, in an injured air ; for he had scientific leanings, and always wanted to know what things were made of.

As Jean, after reading the letter, made no allusion to its contents, Mr. Henderson felt himself obliged to fence a little, and try to worm out the secret.

"I dare say, now, he's writ you a mighty civil letter?"

"Yes, very kind indeed. It's from Mrs. Brown."

"P'raps it's hoping you may live to enjoy the present?"

"Well, Mr. Henderson, perhaps it is—and perhaps it isn't; anyhow, you can say we will come down to-night."

"Oh! it's dinner, is it? You'll get a first-rater."

"Yes, I know you have good things going; though it's out of the season now, and delicacies are scarce."

"Ah, but they can get them for a real gentleman like Mr. Brown. Just fancy Aunt Bessie falling on her feet like that! Why, I remember her a little bare-legged, skinny lass——"

"Hush! You forget the half-sovereigns and the half-crown."

"No, I don't. But you're right, Miss Forbes; there may be more to follow. Don't do to look a gift-horse in the mouth. Well, good morning, miss; good morning."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A LATE REPENTANCE.

WHEN Henderson had gone, Jean sat down by the open window, and carefully read her letter.

"MY DEAREST JEAN,

"The more I think of my happiness the more I feel your kindness to me the other day; and dear Harry is quite taken with your brother's frank face, and he wants you both to come and dine at seven to-night. It's like playing at being quality, I know, to dine at that absurd time, but he will do it. He says he must have you both in Australia to help on the sheep-run; and we're all to be friends together, Jean. I shall be so glad if you will come, for you will help me to be saving —you're Scotch, and you know what a penny is worth. If we stay here much longer, we shall surely be ruined; for the money's running out like sand from a child's pocket. Harry has given me a beautiful mantle. I chose the most expensive of the lot quite by mistake, and he won't let me

go back on it. This other he sends to you with his and my love.

"Yours affectionately,
"BESSIE BROWN."

Jean read this twice, and was thinking over a suitable reply to send by Willie, when Mr. Fraser, the Vicar, with his smiling daughter, came up the path.

Jean ran out with a flushed face to meet them.

"Oh, sir, I'm so glad to see you! Come in, Miss Fraser. It's a nice morning, isn't it?"

"Charming," said the Vicar. "And how is your brother? Has he heard of anything yet that will suit him?"

"Well, sir," said Jean, putting out her letter, and turning it over tenderly, "here's a letter come from Mrs. Brown—that is Aunt Bessy, you know, —and they want Angus and me to go back with them to Australia."

"Well, I dare say you couldn't do better. I hear he has got money somehow. Do you know how?"

"Oh yes; he has told us all about it. He was kind to an Australian gentleman when they were wrecked together, and, when the gentleman died, he left his sheep-run to Mr. Brown."

"The Browns are well known hereabouts; it looks very promising. What does your brother think about it?"

"Angus has not seen the letter yet, sir; he was out all night, and has gone to bed for a few hours. But we have talked it over before, and he said that it looked honest. Shall I tell him you think well of it?"

"Certainly; as far as I can gather, Mr. Brown is a man of wealth, and able to perform what he

promises. We shall be having Giles Fletcher's wedding in a few days. Has your brother reconciled himself to his fate yet?"

"He never owns to any sorrow over Minnie; but I can see many signs of—well, I won't say a broken heart; for he's too much of a man to fret his heart out, when there's work to be done."

"Yes; he is a fine fellow, isn't he, Lucy?"

"A great deal too good for Minnie Fletcher—with my kind regards," said Lucy Fraser, indignantly.

"Thank you, Miss Lucy. I'll tell him what you say."

The Rev. C. Fraser and his daughter had a visit to make, two miles away. They passed through the village, and up a steep lane, and across the heath, and through a fir wood, down into a sandy lane, and up again, clambering in the loose dry soil, beneath the young firs, until they reached the open top, from whence they could see the blue waters of the North Sea over the green wood below them, while the red roofs of the houses in the hamlet glistened prettily between the waving branches.

As they paused for a moment to enjoy the view, heather beneath their feet and all round them, larches and evergreens before them, and, between them and the sea, rolling hills and wooded valley, while the scent of pines pervaded the fine sea-breeze, and the hum of insect life thrilled through all, they were conscious of a human voice not far off; yes, there, behind yon filbert-bush sat a man and woman, engaged in close conversation.

"Strangers!" murmured Lucy Fraser to her father.

"Yes, let us look at them; it is early for strangers to visit the coast. Why, to be sure! if it isn't Mrs. Brown! How do you do, my dear

friend? You must introduce me to your husband. I had not the pleasure of knowing him. Thank you, sir; and I am glad to make your acquaintance. This is my daughter, Lucy."

Brown and his wife had risen to greet the Vicar, and, after the first few words had passed, Aunt Bessie asked Mr. Fraser to step aside with her, as she had something to say.

"Willingly, Mrs. Brown; and Mr. Brown shall instruct Lucy in the mysteries of bush-life."

"You see, sir," said Mrs. Brown, fixing her dark eyes on the Vicar's handsome face; "we were talking about that marriage of Minnie Fletcher's."

"Ah! she has been very headstrong about it, poor child."

"But we must stop it; it cannot take place, sir."

The woman's tone startled Mr. Fraser. Was she wandering in mind now? He glanced sharply at her more than once.

"I've been telling my husband, and he agrees with me, that the marriage must be prevented."

"But things have gone too far, Mrs. Brown; they have been asked three times in Church."

"I don't care if they've been asked thirty times! I beg pardon, if I am rude; but the more I think of it, the more I feel it is our duty to stop it. If you knew——"

"Well, why shouldn't I know your facts?"

"Because they are so disgraceful. You might think it your duty to follow them up, and get some one into trouble."

"It is not the duty of a parish priest to act as a constable, nor even as a minister of justice. What you tell me in confidence, Mrs. Brown, shall go no further than you wish. If my advice can be any help to you, you have only to ask it."

"Let us sit on this heathery bank a minute or

two, sir, while I tell you why Giles is no fit mate for our Minnie."

"You are going to speak of his poaching, perhaps?"

"I might; a poacher makes a bad husband, but a murderer makes a worse."

"Good gracious! a murderer! You don't mean it really?"

"Yes, I do, sir; sorry am I to say it, seeing Giles is a Fletcher, of Nether Beckthorp, as we all are: what touches one touches all."

"But, my good woman, it is a very serious charge to bring against a man, and should only be said on very good evidence."

"So my husband says; but I have satisfied him it is true. Giles shot old Mr. Forbes, the Squire's head keeper!"

"How do you know that?"

"His ram-rod was found near the body."

"That might lead to suspicion, Mrs. Brown; but it does not prove that Giles fired the shot."

"No, perhaps not; but Giles was out that night with some poachers, and came home with a dog's teeth-marks in his coat."

"Well?"

"It seems that Mr. Forbes's mastiff—a dog that ain't like to make mistakes, as you know—tracked the murderer."

"Ha! still, Giles might have been defending his friend, who had been using his gun."

"Well, there was an old man—an old poacher—employed by the Squire in mending hedges; one day he let out to young Forbes that—well, he let out as much as to say that Giles had done it."

"Who told you this?"

"Jean Forbes had it from her brother, and told me in confidence."

"Where is that old man you speak of?"

"That's what I'm coming to, sir. It seems old George thought he had a hold over Giles, knowing as he did who shot Mr. Forbes; and it is thought he tried to get money out o' Giles."

"But this is not evidence, Mrs. Brown; this is hearsay and opinion."

"Oh, I ask pardon! I'm not clever in lawyer's lingo. I only go by facts; and what I see, I believe."

"Very well; then what fact have you got to found your story on?"

Mrs. Brown fumbled in her pocket; then she remembered she was wearing a new cloak, and muttered, as she got up and pulled up her skirt, and rummaged in a secret pocket—

"I'd a'most forgotten he'd come home and given me a new cloak; these things do flummox a body so."

At last she pulled out a bit of silk—coloured silk, rather the worse for wear—from her petticoat-pocket, and held it out—

"This fact—this fact—it wants a lot of explaining."

Mr. Fraser took it, saying, "And what may this be?"

"A bit of Giles Fletcher's neck-tie, your reverence."

"Very well; and you found it?"

"Yes, I found it—I found it, sir. Dear me! my head is giving way. After all, we have no right to judge one another."

Mrs. Brown was murmuring to herself rather than talking to the Vicar; she ended by thrusting the neck-tie back into her pocket.

The Vicar glanced sharply at her; it must be another of her delusions, he thought. It will be serious work trying to fasten such a charge on the lad upon the evidence of such a woman.

"Come, Mrs. Brown," he said, in a gentle tone, "try and collect your thoughts; how do you bring this bit of stuff in as evidence against Giles? What has the tie to do with it?"

"The tie? Poor lad! I gave him that tie; it was a birthday present; I bought it of a hawker down town."

"Well, can't you tell me how you connect it with the murder?"

"No, I solidly can't," said Mrs. Brown, shaking her head, and picking a leaf to pieces. "I've gone and jumbled up two things together. Now I come to think it over, I find the neck-tie had nothing to do with the murder of Mr. Forbes."

Aunt Bessie had relented at the last moment, and could not bring herself to give the fatal evidence; she went on—

"But don't you think, sir, that the finding of the ram-rod, and the cutting of his coat, and the words of old George, and the growling of the mastiff whenever she sees Giles (for that's what they say she does)—don't you think all that makes it look very ugly for the boy, Mr. Fraser?"

"I do, indeed; it is so ugly that I think you are quite warranted in doing all you can to stop the marriage. If he is innocent he will not be frightened by your charges, and if he be guilty, he will take flight as soon as he hears them. We must not, however, lend ourselves to any scheme for defeating justice. You may be called upon for your evidence, some day, if more facts come to light, but I don't think you are bound to take the first steps."

"But, sir, I want to stop the marriage!"

"Well, and what do you propose I should do in the matter?"

"Send for Giles to your house, and tell him you

know all about his goings on. Bid him give up Minnie, and leave the country, or you will have the law on him."

"Well, Mrs. Brown, you have a head on your shoulders—you were the only person in the parish who refused to believe that Mr. Brown was drowned, and now I think you have hit upon a plan which may be successful. Here comes Mr. Brown; we will ask him. Mr. Brown, I have heard this sad story about Giles Fletcher, and your wife suggests that I should send for the lad, and tell him he must submit to a searching inquiry into his conduct before the marriage can take place. There seem to be some ugly facts against the boy; circumstantial evidence may hang an innocent man, and we must be careful what we do or say. Now, if the lad shows by his behaviour that he fears a strict examination, and still more, if he makes off and deserts the parish, we shall then be fully justified in considering our suspicions well-founded. I will write an abstract of the affair, and keep it in readiness to send to Norwich Castle. It is your wife's idea, sir."

"Well done, Bess! She had been putting that job on me this morning; but I think, sir, that you are in a better position to do it."

"It is not a pleasant duty; but we must not allow poor Minnie to run into a snare, if we can help it. But why should you not be a witness at Giles's visit to my library?"

"I am quite willing to come, and bring bowie knife and revolver too. Perhaps the sight of them might convince Master Giles he can't always have his own way in this world."

"To-morrow evening, at six o'clock—will that suit you?"

"Quite. Look, sir, there's my wife talking to

your daughter as sensible as one could wish any woman to talk. It's difficult to believe that her mind has been unhinged."

"I am very glad to see her so contented and restful; her face has lost much of that wild and sorrowful expression which used to vex it: but you must expect some trouble at times, I fear. It was only on one point she was strange, you remember."

"Yes; you all thought her mad, I know; but facts have proved that she was right, and the community was mad."

Mr. Brown laughed till the hill re-echoed, and the wood-pigeon cooed and flew across from the fir-wood to the larches.

That afternoon a Victoria and a pair of bays were carefully watched as they passed through Beckthorp.

Harry Bent, the cobbler, who was preparing his snares as he chatted to Giles Fletcher, peered through his little window at the grand equipage rolling magnificently by.

"Look ye here, Giles, lad; if there ain't old Aunt Bess riding like a duchess along in a real, spanking carriage."

The two men gazed in wonder at the strange sight.

"Well, lad, you don't say nothing," said Harry, clapping Giles on the shoulder, "and—blow me! if you aren't as white as milk."

"Harry, you have meant well by me, I know," said Giles, slowly, fixing his large, dark eyes on Harry Bent's ferret-like face. "Yes, you have meant well, I doubt not; and you have taught me the craft of snaring a hare and netting a pheasant; but God knows what evil you have wrought in me, Harry. What might I have been if I had never

GILES SAT DOWN, AND LEANED HIS HEAD ON HIS HANDS.

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come across you! I'm ashamed to think of what I am now; and that's the truth."

"Why, Giles, lad! cheer up, my heartie. Have a glass of gin and shake off the blues. Think of the bonny fine nights we have had in the Squire's coverts and plantations."

"I'll never poach again, Harry. I'll try and turn over a new leaf, and live more worthy of her."

Harry whistled softly to himself, and the lean lurcher that slept on the mat by the fire roused herself, and cocked one ear. Giles sat down, and leaned his head on his hands. After a long silence he murmured to himself—

"Angus Forbes, you have had your revenge. You said to me in the wood, 'Giles, I leave you to the great Judge of all the earth.' The great Judge —ah! I can see Him now. He has His black cap on, and He is going to pronounce sentence on me."

Harry Bent went to the cupboard, and poured out a glass of gin; but, to his great astonishment, Giles put aside the glass, and abruptly left the house.

"Blessed if they Fletchers ain't all mad. First it was Aunt Bessie, and her queer belief in Providence; now we have Giles turning white at the thought of the great Judge. The great Judge! I wonder if there's anything in it. Here goes the gin, any way."

CHAPTER XXV.

A LOVER'S WALK.

TO-MORROW Minnie Fletcher is to be married. She has been all the morning in her mother-in-law's house, where she is to live with Giles—oh, how many happy years! There has been so much to do, choosing the linen and the glass from the thrifty savings of more than fifty years.

Mrs. Fletcher, Giles's mother, having no daughter of her own, and not being so strong as she had been, was right glad to welcome Minnie to her home, and had said over and over again to the laughing girl—

"This shall be yours, my dear; and you may as well have that, for I want little now."

"Oh, mother, you are stripping yourself of all your best things!"

"Never mind, child: no fear that Giles and I shall quarrel; he will let me share with you as long as I live."

"It shan't be my fault, mother, if you're not comfortable," said Minnie, giving her a kiss out of gratitude.

That afternoon Giles called for her to take a

walk on the cliff. It was a beautiful day; a fresh wind blew out of the north-west, and clouds scudded swiftly across the sky, the shadows chasing one another over the hills inland, and across the heather and the green corn-lands and the smooth downs and the bright, blue sea eastward.

When Giles and Minnie reached the stile where the old hedger had waited on that eventful night, the smile died out of young Fletcher's eyes, and the lines of his mouth grew hard.

Minnie was so full of talk and laughter that she did not notice his silence; her happiness was too deep to suspect the presence of any bitter thought in her lover's mind.

They strolled along the edge of the cliff—as near, at least, as they dare, for the soil was ever crumbling and falling, and year by year the downs were robbed of large slabs and slices of smooth turf.

"I shall never want any pleasure beyond a walk with you, Giles, on these cliffs; so you need not bother about me, and talk of taking me to Norwich, or Peterborough, or London, if I ever look fagged. All you have to do is to chuck me under the chin, and say, 'Minnie, come for a walk on the cliff,' and you'll see the trouble will pass away from my eyes, and once more I shall be a light-hearted girl again. Why, I've played on these cliffs ever since I can remember! and when you've spent so many happy hours in a place, you come to love it; don't you think so, Giles?"

"Well, yes, I suppose you do; but come away from the edge, or you'll be turning giddy. Minnie, come back!"

But Minnie was bent on looking over, just to show Giles that he was not master yet. She caught a glimpse of the blue water lapping on the stones,

of sunlight dancing on the level spaces between the waves, and of a white fringe, as of lace, stretching round the curve of the cliff.

Then she felt herself caught in a powerful grip and almost flung on the smooth sward. Giles, with flashing eyes stood over her, and drew a deep sigh as he muttered—

"This place is very dangerous, Minnie. Oh, you have given me such a fright! I thought it was the judgment of the great Judge coming on me. Oh dear! oh dear!"

"What's the matter, Giles? Why do you look so frightened?"

"What have I said?" asked Giles, coming to himself again.

"Strange words about the judgment to come. I don't understand you."

"I thought you were done for in this world, Minnie; like poor George, who fell over here when he was drunk."

"But I'm not drunk, you silly," said the girl, laughing.

"I am a silly, that's the truth. I was afraid I was going to lose you, just like Mr. Brown did Aunt Bessie. There's some queer fate hangs over us Fletchers; we always get the cup dashed from our lips just when we think we are going to have a nice, long pull at it. It's mortal hard on us."

"Stuff and nonsense, Giles, about fate. I don't believe in fate at all. I think if folks get the cup snatched from them they probably deserve it."

"Oh, then, you put it down to Providence, do you? Well, you don't get much for'arder that way. Look at the way good folks gets knocked about in this life. David said he had never seen

a good man in want; but if he had lived in this country he might have seen a many, mightn't he?"

"Some good folks don't seem to use their wits, Giles. I suppose we're not meant to act like idiots when we've done saying our prayers."

"Well, then, what had Aunt Bessie and Harry Brown done to bring upon them such a calamity?"

"Done?" said Minnie, tickling Giles's nose with a long bent of grass, as they sat side by side, on the high slope. "Done? I think that Harry richly deserved his fate. What right had he to go rowing out in a boat, all alone, just after he had got married?"

"Ha, ha! you are a good one for getting out of a poser, you are. But, come now! What had poor Aunt Bessie done to call down all that long suffering on her? For I reckon she suffered most of the two."

"That's easily answered, Master Wise-acre. When she let her husband go out alone like that she forgot her wifely duty; she wanted a lesson, and she got a sharper one than I should have given her, to be sure."

"Minnie, there's no arguing with you, dear; there's only one way of stopping your mouth."

"And how do you do that?"

"By kissing you on the lips."

"No, excuse me, Giles: to-morrow, if you don't go out in a boat without me, you may do it to your heart's content; but this afternoon I am still a modest maid."

"You're a lot too modest, Minnie; any other girl would have let me kiss her."

"You wouldn't have me just like any other girl, Giles?"

"I'm not so sure of that. You'll take a deal of

breaking in, I know. You have a will of your own."

"I have; there's to be no more poaching, Giles."

"All right; I am sick of the whole thing. I told Bent to-day that I would have no more of it. In fact, I showed him pretty plain that I was tired of him and his ways."

"That's a good boy! No more poaching! That will be one good step, won't it? And the next step, Giles?"

"Well, pretty one, what's to be the next?"

"No more drinking at the Three Jolly-boats."

"Pooh! I never have gone in for drinking, lass; and one goes in there just as a swell goes to his club, to hear the news and spend an idle hour."

"But, Giles, I shall want your idle hours now. There will be nets to mend, and boats to paint, and things to do to the house and garden, to make all right for the visitors in the summer. And then, I always mistrust that drink. Remember poor George yonder."

Giles shuddered a little as he replied, "I'm not like to forget it. I was with him just before he died."

"Yes, he sat by your side, didn't he, when you were at the tavern? Poor fellow, what did he talk about?"

"Oh, he was too drunk to talk much! But let us try and forget him, Minnie; it's not nice talk that."

"No, it makes one feel rather queer. Why, what a lot of horrible things have happened in these last few years! There was the Squire's sudden death, and then Jean Forbes has to go. I like Jean, and I like her brother well enough. Poor things!

they've got trouble enough, haven't they, Giles? To think of their father being shot like that—such a nice, well-mannered man as he was too! Oh, I wish I had been by with a stout cudgel!"

Giles felt he had better say something, so he said—

"Why?"

"Why!" repeated Minnie, her dark eyes flashing fiercely; "I would have dealt the murderer one on the head, that's all."

Giles got up; the conversation was not pleasing to him.

"Let us walk on, Minnie; it's rather chilly sitting here."

Minnie allowed him to help her to her feet, but her mind had not supped enough on horrors.

"I say, Giles, have you ever seen a dead man?"

After a pause, Giles replied, "Yes, I've seen some poor fellows who were drowned."

"Ah! I suppose they look calm enough; but a murdered man, now? I don't suppose you ever saw the face of a murdered man, did you?"

"How sweet the larks are singing up in the clouds, Minnie."

"Yes, they are newly paired. Their wants are provided for; so are ours, Giles: their consciences are easy, so are ours: we, too, can sing and be happy and thank God, can't we?"

"Ah, my darling, I want to be happy, and I want to be good; will you teach me how? But when I try to be happy, evil thoughts come and disturb me."

"But we are going to be happy, Giles. You have promised me faithfully to give up your bad companions, so we can be happy. Our consciences

will not reproach us any longer. I have full trust in you, darling."

Giles pressed the little arm that lay in his. Full trust in him! it made him feel better in heart already. If only this charming girl could be with him in his hours of temptation, how easy would it be for him to resist evil.

They walked up and down the undulating cliff-walk, still devising schemes for married life. Minnie had gone into brighter themes for converse now, and her merry laugh would at times disturb the rabbit or the fieldfare; while it made Giles feel that, above the silent reproaches of his awakening conscience, he might enjoy the luxury of having a music as sweet as it was innocent in its source.

"Yes," he was saying to himself, "I think I am the last person to be suspected now. Though Angus Forbes knows my secret, he won't split. And he is going to another part of the country soon. Yes, I think I'm pretty safe. Probably he was only making a guess when he got me down and charged me with murdering his father; and nobody heard me confess to having done it. I think I'm safe; but, all the same, it's not very comfortable living over a barrel of gunpowder. If mother was dead, I would sell all and cut the country—go off with Minnie to New Zealand or somewhere."

"What are you thinking of, Giles?"

"Oh, nothing in particular. You said just now that you liked Angus Forbes. I know he is very sweet on you, darling. How was it you did not take him instead of me? He's a fine chap, and so steady."

"Why did I not take Angus Forbes?" asked Minnie, taking her arm out of Giles's. "Well, I

suppose I felt drawn to you most. I'm always a little frightened when I am with Mr. Forbes; and I have known you ever since I was a baby. Besides, Giles, I do so want to save you from your enemies."

"Enemies! what enemies? Do you know of any one who wants to harm me, Minnie?"

"Your own vices, dear boy; don't look so scared. But tell me, how is it you can speak of Mr. Forbes in that calm way? Have you given over being jealous of him?"

"Yes, quite dropped all that. He has been very generous to me, and we have made up all our quarrel; you need not fear I will be jealous of him again. I really like the chap now; he's a real good-hearted one."

Minnie pondered over this change of sentiment in Giles. She wondered how Forbes could have found an opportunity for being generous; but she asked no questions, for she thought to herself—

"To-morrow I am to be married to him, and it will be my fault if I don't know all his secrets before the week is out."

All his secrets! Poor girl! she had not fathomed the depths of that mind, so weak, so crafty, so insincere. They parted in the town-street, and Giles went in to have tea with his mother.

"Giles," said she, "here's a note come for you from Mr. Fraser. One of the young ladies brought it. It's got 'important' on it, and I said you should be sure and attend to it after tea."

Giles smiled as he broke the seal. "The parson wants to tell me how I'm to behave at the wedding, I guess."

But inside the letter were only these words:—

"Giles, I want to see you at six this evening.

"C. FRASER."

"Bah! he treats me like a small boy in the choir; but I shall let him know who I am."

His mother smiled, and looked proudly at her son: to-morrow was to be the proudest day in her life!

Giles was very silent during tea; for he was wondering if Angus had told the Vicar about that Firleby Wood business, and whether that was the reason why the Vicar had sent for him. Angus had certainly exacted from him a promise not to marry Minnie; but he surely would not be so cruel, now that he was going away. Still, he felt uneasy about it—very uneasy. Oh, if he could only get rid of these terrible panics and misgivings! Life was becoming very irksome to him, and the shadow of the hangman fell across every pleasant path.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN ULTIMATUM.

MR. BROWN had just had a cup of tea with the Vicar and his three daughters, entertaining them with yarns about his life on the desert island and in the Australian bush.

"It has struck six. I think we had better adjourn to the library," said Mr. Fraser to his guest.

Accordingly the two men lit their pipes in the small sanctum, whose window looked out into the garden by the side of the house.

"Suppose he does not come?" said Mr. Brown.

"I think he will," said the Vicar, blowing a circle into the air; "he will think it concerns his wedding to-morrow."

"And he won't be far wrong, either, I reckon."

Then they fell to discussing the best way of dealing with their man; but, before they had settled the method of procedure, a little girl ushered Giles into the room.

He came in with a smile upon his lips, playing unconcernedly with his sealskin cap.

"You sent for me, I believe, sir? Here I am, you see; pretty punctual, though the notice was rather short."

As he was speaking he saw from the faces of the two men before him that something was wrong, and his voice grew softer as his sentence drew to a close.

"Giles," said the Vicar, "please to shut the door and sit down; we have some serious business before us, I am afraid."

Giles Fletcher's face turned pale for a moment, but he sat down with rather a defiant air, and fired the first shot.

"It is the poaching, I dare say, you want to talk about; but I have explained to Mr. Forbes, the head keeper, how it was I went out the other day. I have said good-bye to all that for ever now—word of honour, gentlemen."

"I wish you would say 'good-bye' to Minnie Fletcher, too," said Mr. Brown, tapping the ashes out of his pipe.

"Do you? It strikes me you're rather too late in your wishes."

"I don't think I am, young man; and let me tell you that you may as well adopt a more becoming manner here."

"I'm as good as you, Mr. Brown; you needn't give yourself airs on account of your money, which you never earned."

"I did not commit murder to obtain it, Giles Fletcher."

Giles tried to brazen it out, and replied fiercely—

"If you sent for me, Mr. Fraser, for this fellow to insult me, I think I'd better be going home."

"No insult is intended, Giles Fletcher," said the Vicar; "but Mr. Brown, as the husband of a Miss Fletcher, objects to your marrying Minnie; and the

objection rests on a very serious charge which we wish you to hear."

"Well, sir, I have been a good friend of yours, all my life ; it does seem an unneighbourly thing to spring charges upon a chap like this on the day before his wedding."

"I'm sorry I'm so late," said Mr. Brown ; "but it was not until yesterday that I heard all the evidence there was against you."

At the word "evidence" Giles started, but, quickly recovering, replied—

"People talk about evidence when they mean scandal. What do you charge me with ? Let's have it out at once."

"I charge you with murdering Mr. Forbes in Firleby wood."

Giles started to his feet, and thumped his fist on the table as he shouted in reply—

"It's a lie ! a devilish lie ! "

"I wish it was, Giles, with all my heart," said the Vicar.

"What's the evidence, sir ? I can't speak to him."

"A ram-rod was found near the body."

"What of that ? it wasn't mine."

"It belonged to your gun ; both the gun and the ram-rod had the figure of a seal engraved upon them."

"Oh, then it was my gun. I beg your pardon, sir. Now, who had been using my gun, I wonder ? Nothing easier than for one of the boys to go to the place where we keep them, and take out my gun. I am surprised at your bringing such a disgraceful charge on such trumpery evidence."

"That's not all, young man. I have other evidence," said Mr. Brown.

Giles leaned across the table, and shook his fist, saying—

"You villain, you've some deep design in all this."

Mr. Brown removed his pocket-handkerchief quietly from the table, and disclosed a very pretty revolver. He tapped it with his two fingers, and said softly—

"I have provided against accidents, you see; so bullying won't pay. Sit down, you young scoundrel, and hear us patiently. The village policeman is in the kitchen; if you don't obey us, we will give you in charge. Sit down, I say."

"Yes, sit down, Giles; you will gain nothing by violence. And understand that we do not wish to press you unfairly; but these are grave facts which you must explain to us."

Giles sat down, looking flushed and anxious.

Mr. Brown resumed: "You were out with the poachers that night; of this we can bring the evidence of eye-witnesses."

"I was out a bit, but I had gone home before that happened."

"Leaving your gun in the charge of some one else?"

Giles nodded assent, and sat back defiantly.

"But I believe you were bitten by a dog that night?"

"Well, yes, I was; some time before Mr. Forbes was shot."

"I beg your pardon; the dog was not let loose until the fatal shot was fired, as you well know."

"It was not the mastiff that bit me; it was another dog."

"Giles," said the Vicar, in solemn tones, "what do you know about a mastiff? the word 'mastiff' was never mentioned."

"No, sir; but I have talked a good deal to the boys about that night's doings, and I have heard

how the mastiff was let loose and bit some one. I think it was poor old George."

"You see," said Mr. Brown, "he is a slippery customer—has an answer ready for every one."

"Do you mean to say, Giles," went on the Vicar, "that you were bitten by one of your own dogs, that knew you so well?"

"Yes, sir. You see, there were some Yarmouth boys out that night. I had never seen them before, nor their dogs. I had to whip one of the dogs for giving tongue, and he bit me in the arm."

"Do you know the mastiff up at the keeper's?"

"Oh yes; seen him lots of times."

"Ah, I suppose he knows you too, and would hardly be likely to fly at you?"

Giles brightened up; after all, the Vicar was trying to help him out of his difficulty. He replied briskly—

"The dog knows me well—wouldn't fly at me, certainly not."

"Then, how do you account, Giles," said the Vicar, "for that mastiff trying to fly at you in the street a few weeks after that night in the wood? For I am told that, unless young Forbes had held him in a chain, he would have jumped at your throat."

"It was not me he wanted to get at, but my dog; he always goes like that when he sees my dog."

"If that mastiff were to be posted at the church door to-morrow, you don't fear he would fly at you?"

"Not unless he smelt my dog, sir."

"Very well. Now, Mr. Brown, you wish, I think, to have a few words in private with Giles."

"Yes, if you please, Mr. Fraser; if we cannot prove our charges, we must try other arguments."

"Giles," said Mr. Brown, when they were alone,

"old George said that he was out that night with you, and saw you bitten by the mastiff. Of course, I know this is no evidence against you; but still, straws tell which way the wind blows. What have you to say to this?"

"Only this, sir, that old George had a bit of a grudge against me, and when he was drunk he would make up stories that everybody in his senses knew to be false."

"You knew that he had a grudge against you, before he died?"

"Yes, I did; he tried to get money out of me by threatening to accuse me of this and that."

"You were not with him when he fell from the cliff?"

"No, sir; I had been sitting near him at the tavern, but I had gone with my dog after a rabbit, and when I came back I heard he had fallen over."

Mr. Brown paused a long while, then asked—

"Had you such fear of the old man's threats that you wished him dead?"

"Not I; it made no matter to me what he said. I was as innocent as a babe unborn—and a good deal more so."

Mr. Brown smiled a slow smile, and asked quietly—

"This being the case, it was hardly necessary for you to push the poor fellow over the cliff yonder."

"Who says I did it? it's a shameful lie."

"This bit of satin says you did." And Mr. Brown drew from his breast pocket the neck-tie which his wife had found, and which he laid on the table beside the revolver.

Giles looked at the neck-tie, and said, "I don't understand what you are driving at, master. Just let me have it in my hands."

"No, you don't," said Mr. Brown, putting his

large hand upon the satin. "This is worth a man's life."

Giles breathed hard and the colour left his cheek; he began to feel that he was trapped in a hole from which there was no way out. But he murmured in a hollow voice—

"It never was mine, sir, never!"

"Then, why did your good mother work your name on it?" said Mr. Brown, pointing out the neat red letters.

Giles gasped for breath; he was hardly prepared with a reply.

"Now, lad, it is quite useless to tell another lie. You might say, you had given him the tie; but why was he clutching it in his death-grip? You might say——"

"Please, sir, who says he found it so?"

"I cannot give you the name; but it was one who wishes you well, and whom it would be idle to distrust."

Giles sat for a minute looking on the ground; his mind was rapidly going through all possible reasons for old George having that neck-tie in his death-grasp. At last he looked up, and said—

"It must be so, as I thought it was at first. George and I had a bit of a squabble in the tavern, and he snatched at my neck just before he went out. I never missed my tie; and when I went to bed that night, I thought I must have gone without one all day, as I often do; so I took no heed. I own it looks queer to one who doesn't know the facts; but I hope and trust you will believe me when I——"

"Believe you?" said Mr. Brown, taking up his revolver; "not a word of truth in what you have said this evening—not a word of truth. Now, look here, young man: I'm not going to have that girl,

Minnie Fletcher, married to a poacher, a liar, a murderer! You have got to choose in the next ten minutes which you will do. Will you stay here and be arrested for murder, or will you leave the place and ship for the colonies? If you will stay here, I will see that a policeman is in attendance to arrest you before you enter the church; if, on the other hand, you elect to try your luck in the colonies, I will get you a passage to New Zealand or Australia. But you must choose now, and start in less than two hours' time. I am breaking the law by not giving you into custody; I risk that for the sake of your family."

Giles Fletcher had been writhing like a worm during this speech; but it was evidently a relief to him to escape the clutch of the law.

At this moment the Vicar returned to the room, saying—

"Well, Mr. Brown, have your arguments been more efficacious than mine?"

"Yes, Mr. Fraser, I think I have shown this young man that he can have no hope of marrying Minnie; he has not in words yet promised to relinquish the attempt, but I think he will now hardly care to refuse my offer."

"I am glad, and yet I am sorry," said the Vicar. "I am glad for Minnie's sake; but I cannot help being very sorry for your mother, Giles. Poor woman! it is enough to break her heart. And then, think of the cruel blow to Minnie herself. It is too terrible! I cannot suppose that Mr. Brown has bribed you to go and leave the poor girl; you would not do that, I believe. There must be some grave misdeeds of yours which you fear may come to light if you stay. I am not at all sure that it is not our duty to give what evidence we have to the police."

Giles had melted at the thought of his mother's sorrow; the tears stood in his eyes, as he faltered out—

"Oh, sir, think of my poor mother, and give me one more chance, just one more, sir. I see it all now: I was led on without thinking of the consequences. Oh, sir, God is merciful, and His ministers are merciful too."

The Vicar rose, and said sternly, "Don't play the canting hypocrite here, young man. It is true God's ministers should be merciful; but to whom? To a young innocent girl, or to a mean, selfish, and unprincipled villain? For this, and nothing else, is what you have become. No, I will exercise no mercy which will do a wrong to the innocent. Your very presence among us might poison the moral atmosphere of the parish. If you are not guilty of the graver charges, you have made friends of poachers and murderers. You must go; leave to me the duty of informing your poor mother and Minnie Fletcher about your departure. I will break it as softly as I can to your widowed mother."

The murderer had fine feelings and emotions tenderer than most men; he was sobbing as if his poor little heart would break. Plato would have seen in it fresh evidence that all sin is the result and outcome of ignorance. If, as Giles had said, he had only known all the consequences of his acts, how differently he would have acted!

In other words, it was not the sin he hated, but the punishment thereof. The Vicar thought that there was little hope of immediate amendment in a fellow of that kidney.

It was agreed, therefore, that Giles should be locked up in a room in the Vicarage until such things as he desired could be fetched from his home.

"Now, sir," said Mr. Brown to the Vicar, when they were walking alone in the garden, "as this boy prefers to decamp rather than meet a jury of his countrymen, I guess you will not open the church for to-morrow's ceremonial."

"It would be rather a farce certainly to pretend we were waiting for the bridegroom; but I shall wait till to-morrow before I say anything. To-morrow I must go to poor Minnie, and break the terrible news to her as well as I can."

"Girls are sad fools, sir. I understand she might have had that young Forbes, who is a really worthy fellow."

"Ah, Brown, it is no use for you or me to criticize the feminine instinct. Well, I thank you for coming. Good night. Have you got your stick —and revolver?"

"All right. Good night, sir."

Then the Vicar went to his desk and took out the memorandum which he had drawn up regarding the keeper's death; this he signed and sealed, then rang for the constable.

"Atkins, put this in the post, as you go home; keep an eye on Giles Fletcher, if you see him about; there is something wrong."

The constable saluted, and left the house.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MR. BROWN'S COURIER.

JEAN FORBES and her brother had been dining at the big hotel as the guests of Mr. and Mrs. Brown. The latter had jumped up several times during dinner "to save" the poor waiter, and had made round eyes at her husband when he, with his usual recklessness, had ordered sparkling wine. Poor Angus could not help thinking of to-morrow's wedding, for Mr. Brown had not yet told any of them what had been done at the Vicarage; his wife knew that Giles was to be met at six o'clock, but Mr. Brown had returned from Beckthorp late for dinner, the guests were already in the room, and there had been no time to say anything in private. Angus had, however, resolved in his mind to have Giles arrested, if he persisted in his intention of marriage.

After dinner they sat by the open window, looking out upon the cliff. There were no houses between them and the sea, though it was a six minutes' walk to the water's edge. The afternoon had been close and sultry, and now the sheet lightning was playing round the sky and revealing transient glimpses of white sails and green slopes and red-tiled village on the right.

"Well, Forbes, have you made up your mind yet?"

"Yes, I think I have, and many thanks to you, sir. Jean says she should like nothing better than to live in Australia; so, if you're satisfied, I am sure we are."

"Capital! Do you hear that, Bess? They will come with us. You won't feel so strange, now, will you?"

"Thank you, Jeannie," said Mrs. Brown; "you have made me so happy, you can't think. I couldn't a-bear going out alone to them savages — only think of it!"

"She will have it we're all savages in Australia," laughed Mr. Brown. "As soon as I get her to Melbourne, I shall take her to the biggest hotel, and get her a box at the theatre. Oh, I'll take the savage notions out of her, trust me!"

"I wonder what poor Minnie is doing to-night," said Mrs. Brown, by way of giving her husband a cue.

"Ah, by-the-by, is that door shut? No savage waiters lurking behind the coal-scuttle? Well, then, listen to me. We met Giles Fletcher at the Vicarage, and frightened him out of his wedding. He went away an hour ago."

"What's that you say?" exclaimed Angus, who had been leaning out of the window, listening to the voices of the night. "Gone away, do you say? Where to?"

"To the station. My man has gone with him; he is to see him safe on board ship, for New Zealand, where he may do very well, if he turns over about fifteen new leaves."

Angus had forgotten all about the sounds of the night now.

"Do you mean to tell me that Giles Fletcher has given up Minnie, and chosen to run away?"

"Well, he had not much of a choice; if he stayed

here, it might have been a hanging matter. Now the girl is free once more."

"Poor Minnie! what a dreadful shock it will be for her!" murmured Angus, half to himself.

"She deserves something of that nature, Forbes, for preferring that young rascal to you."

Angus blushed. "I don't wonder at her choice. I'm an awful blunderer when I get amongst that sex. I always say the things they don't like to hear."

"And Giles," put in Jean, "had such a happy knack of saying pleasant things, that most girls would be more taken with Giles than with my brother. Still, she has had time to find out what they're stuffed with, for certain."

"You mean, she has sat upon them both, perhaps?"

Jean smiled and curled her lip. Being Scotch, she hardly approved of such levity in a man over forty.

"Who is going to break the news to her?" asked Angus.

"And to his poor mother?" added Mrs. Brown.

"The Vicar will go down and let them know, he says."

"Poor Minnie," repeated Angus; "I am glad I had nothing to do in the matter. But it's very sudden: what money could he take with him, or what things?"

"We sent down for some clothes. His mother would think they were for his wedding trip. And we made him up a little purse."

"We!" cried Mrs. Brown, indignantly; "you aren't going to tell me that you've wasted more money on that—— Well, I never did! I never did!"

Mrs. Brown looked so exactly "as if she never

did," that all the company forgot their manners and laughed outright.

At this moment there was a tap at the door, and a head appeared. It was the valet, courier, confidential servant. His hair was towselled about his face, and his expression was that of one who has been foiled.

"Hi, William! What on earth brings you back again?"

But William replied in the softest of asides, "Could I speak with you privately, sir?"

"We are all in the secret of your errand. You may speak. Bless the fellow! I hope he has not brought Giles back."

"I have travelled in Siberia, Russia, Italy, Sicily, the Holy Land, but never in all my life have I felt so foolish, sir, as I do to-night. I return like an absolute fool."

"You do, William," replied Mr. Brown, tartly. "I understand you to say that you have made a fool of yourself in divers parts of the world, but never such an egregious fool as to-night; eh, William?"

"Something of that nature, ladies and gentlemen. Thinking I had to do with a country bumpkin, I allowed myself to be taken off my guard. Such a thing has seldom happened to me in——"

"Come, come! your story, sir; what has happed?"

"I beg pardon for my long and prolix statements. It is not my habit to have recourse to circumlocutory——"

"Now then, William, cut the long words and tell us your story."

Mr. William pulled up short with an aggrieved air, then with a sigh he stroked his dark moustache, and put his hand in his bosom, and began again—

"We set off as nice as could be in the dog-cart, with his little bundle of things behind. For the first

half-hour he said little, though I tried to draw him out on the subject of pheasants' eggs. But soon he began to thaw, and speak so nice and pleasant that, as I said, it was a real pleasure to drive him, and I gave him several useful hints about colonial life. The boy who rode behind was quite won over, he has told me since, to the idea of transportation."

"Perhaps you mean emigration," said Mr. Brown.

"Pardon me, emigration is a better word without doubt; so, then, we crossed the moors and traversed the high land, and had reached a wooded country, where it grew wondrous dark, and, as the hill was steep, the man, Giles, suggested that he should get down and walk. I got down too, and then he fell to talking of the beautiful girl to whom he was to be married to-morrow. And his voice grew so sweet and pathetic I felt a great lump rise in my throat; and, if the Vicar's pony had not stumbled, I think I should have given way to an access of tears."

"Great ass!" murmured Mr. Brown, unsympathetically.

"'Ought a man to desert the girl he loves?' he asked me once.

"'That all depends on circumstances,' I replied; 'I understand that your circumstances just now are urgent for you to go to foreign parts. If the girl loves you, she will wait till you return to claim her.'

"'It's a long way to New Zealand,' said he, 'and will cost a mint of money.'

"'But my—Mr. Brown has got you a ticket or free pass. He's a director,' said I.

"'Yes, I know,' says he, in an absent way—in fact, he became very absent, and didn't seem to hear my remarks."

"How very annoying for you! I suppose, William, there's something coming soon, or you wouldn't be here?"

"Yes, sir, I'm coming to the end of it now. We had attained the summit of the declivity, and I had climbed to my seat. He began feeling about as if he was trying to find a place for his foot in the dark. I heard him climb up, and felt the gig shake when he took his seat. I then tried to comfort him, and spoke of the charms of a well-appointed ship, and, having made a pleasant jest, I nudged him in the ribs; that is to say, my first nudge fell short, so I tried a second—a long nudge, —but my elbow went trailing out into space. Then my brow grew clammy. I clapped my hand on the seat. It was as I had thought—the seat was vacant! warm, but vacant!"

"Do you mean to say you have let him escape?"

"Sir, there are circumstances which baffle human skill. This young man was sitting by my side, listening to my talk; suddenly he was gone. I was driving, my hands were occupied, but I felt certain he sat beside me; and yet I was deceived; I confess it, I was deceived."

"Well, there's one good thing,—I had put the money in your yellow bag; so we have saved that expense, Bess."

Mr. William glanced down his nose, and stroked his hat meditatively; then, with a clearing of his throat, began—

"I am sorry to say that, when we reached the station, the yellow bag was no longer under the seat."

"Well, I never!" cried Mrs. Brown.

"But that is stealing," said Angus. "The bag, it seems, did not belong to him."

"I beg pardon," broke in the courteous courier;

"the young man had made me promise to change bags with him. I consented to this, as my own—the yellow one—was growing old and infirm, but I never thought of his deep designs."

Mr. Brown sat back in his chair, and laughed.

"I'll tell you what, William, I'll tell you what: if that young man comes back, I shall give him your place. He's a much sharper chap than you are; and you can turn poacher. I've seen you poach an egg, by Jove. Ha, ha! so you let him go off with the yellow guineas, bag and all."

"Can I do anything else this evening?" asked the poor, crestfallen man, in a subdued tone.

"You've done plenty for one day, thank you. Go and ask the cook to have mercy on you—I can't."

When William's soft footfall had died away, Mr. Brown said—

"Now, Bess, you're this lad's relation, and you know his ways. What do you think he will do? Turn up for the wedding—eh?"

"Yes; he loves the poor girl fondly, though he has acted so wickedly. I don't think he will desert her."

"But if he comes back he will be taken up; he knows that."

Jean Forbes replied, "I shouldn't wonder if he had been back already, and taken the girl away while you gentlemen were talking. He's a lad of action, Giles is."

A look of horror passed over every face.

"Angus Forbes," said Mrs. Brown, "will you run across to Minnie's house and try and see John Fletcher? Warn him not to lose sight of Minnie. Tell him I sent you."

"Yes," said Mr. Brown, "and tell him it is our wish that Minnie should not leave the house under

any pretext. We will explain our reasons to-morrow, tell him."

Angus was reluctant to go to Minnie's house on the eve of her wedding, but he could not refuse the general wish; so he put a bold face on it, and, taking his hat, ran down the grand staircase as if he knew Giles was decoying his tame pheasants.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MINNIE'S LAST NIGHT AT HOME.

MINNIE FLETCHER was sitting at the table in the back keeping-room, putting a few last touches to her bonnet. John sat with his legs up, and a long pipe in his mouth, and was contemplating Minnie between the whiffs, as he stroked his bushy black beard and whiskers with the right hand. He was thinking how comely she was, and how he should miss her. First Aunt Bessie went, then Minnie, and now poor John Fletcher is left alone; and who was to do for him now? He began to think he should have to get married too; but what lass was good enough for him?

"John, this is our last night together, and you have nothing to say; you sit and smoke, and think —smoke and think."

"Well, isn't it enough to make one think? Who's to make my tea when you're gone? But I wasn't altogether thinking of myself, Minnie; I was looking at the bloom on your cheek, and wondering whether it would be as young-looking and happy a face in six months', aye, or in six weeks' time, as it is

now. Marriage is such a game at hazard, my dear; and I do so want you to be happy."

"I'm sure I thank you, John; but you always did fear evil before it came. You always feared you should cut your nets and lose your lobster-pots—you know you did, John; but it seldom happened. Now, I have chosen a most affectionate boy to be my—— Hark! a step! Here he comes! No; well, if it isn't Mr. Forbes!"

"Good evening, Minnie Fletcher," said Angus.

"Now, that is good of you," said Minnie, colouring as she rose to give him her hand. "I was afraid that you would never come near me any more. But this is good of you, Mr. Forbes; isn't it, John?"

"Aye," said John, nodding at the bowl of his pipe, "I dare say it has cost him something to put his pride in his pocket, and come down to wish you good luck."

"And I do pray God you may have a happy life," stammered Angus, leaning forward with a clenched hand on the table; "I do wish you all joy in life. It is true I had once thought you might have chosen me; I thought I could have provided for you, and made you a good husband. I do love you still, I own it."

At this moment a face peered in from the darkness of the passage without; the face was that of Giles. He must have heard the last words, for his mouth fell open as if a great shock of disappointment had come to him. Not one of the three occupants of the back parlour had noticed him, and he retired with a noiseless tread, as he had come.

Angus had stopped a moment to repress a queer choking sensation which was troubling him, but he went on, watching Minnie's face as she sat at her work.

"Women must choose; we men can only ask."

"Those who ask don't have," said John, taking his pipe out of his mouth for the clearer utterance of this original comment. Angus unfortunately did not even smile.

"Women sometimes choose unwisely," said Minnie, as she deftly wound her cotton round a new button and snapped it off with her teeth. "And as I know you think me rash in choosing Giles, I thank you all the more for not owing me a grudge, Mr. Forbes. In my own mind I am performing a duty to Giles in marrying him; he wants some one to keep him straight, doesn't he?"

"He has wanted some one for years," said Angus. "I can only say that when I taxed him with certain things he seemed repentant, and I forgave him. Remember, Minnie, whatever may happen, I forgive him; and I am ready to help you, or him, or both of you."

"Thank you," said the girl, rather coldly. "You say 'whatever may happen,' as if you thought I shouldn't be happy very long; but remember, Angus Forbes, however happy and prosperous I may be with Giles, I forgive you for your suspicions."

Angus could not take his eyes off the girl, who sat there so unconscious of her fate. He longed to tell her what Giles had done, and how blind she had been, and how unlikely it was that her wedding should take place on the morrow. But he felt that it was not his place to act as adviser, and he knew the Vicar would do it much better. He coughed once or twice to attract the attention of John, but that worthy had his feet higher than his head, and had abstracted his soul from common things. Angus was obliged to go round the table and tap him on the shoulder twice before he would attend.

"John, may I have a word with you, outside?"

"Can't you say it here, man? I'm riding at anchor,

and don't want to weigh now, and—— Well, what are you at?"

Angus had nodded and winked in vain.

"It's a bit of business I am told by Mrs. Brown to do, but, if you won't let me, I must go back to her."

When John Fletcher heard it was Aunt Bessie's message, he slowly rose with a grunt, saying—

"Oh, if it be Aunt Bessie, she be such an uncommon big swell in these parts, you know, one of the quality——"

"May I not hear it?" asked Minnie, with a laugh.

"Not just yet, I'm afraid," answered Angus.

"John," he went on, after they had gained the little plot of garden in front of the house, "there's some hitch on about Giles Fletcher; he's got into a row, and has been to see the Vicar about it. The result is, he may want to get Minnie away to-night, or early to-morrow. Now, you will prevent this, won't you? You want Minnie to be married in church before she goes away, don't you?"

"I fancy I do," said John, setting his teeth.

"If Giles, to spite the Vicar, or for any other reason, seeks to take Minnie away to be married somewhere else——"

"If he do seek, he shall not have my consent to it."

"Thank you, John. I may tell Mrs. Brown you will keep an eye on Minnie to-night?"

"Ay, ay; girl shall go to bed right early: door shall be bolted. Giles better mind how he comes trapessing here."

And with a "Good night," the two men separated.

Now Giles had run back to Beckthorp for three things. First he wished to explain to his mother how it was he was leaving the village; for he loved his mother after a fashion, and would not willingly have given her pain. He had concocted a little

story of disagreement with the Vicar, which would, he hoped, account to her for his sudden departure, and leave her in peace of mind. Secondly, he had come home for more money. It was his idea to go to Grimsby and invest in a share of a steam trawler. He had known other men do the same with success. Thirdly, he had come home for Minnie. If she would not come away with him, he might at least arrange that they should meet at Grimsby. What was life without Minnie? For dear, sweet Minnie he felt he would freely give his —well, a good deal; and that, for Giles, meant a considerable sacrifice.

But when he had heard, on entering John's house, those words from the lips of Angus, "I do love you still; I own it," he felt that his happiness was never more near to being wrecked than now. He hurried back to his mother's house in anger, disappointment, and fear. For what did those words mean? They meant that Forbes had gone to Minnie and told her all about his doings, and his being sent off to the colonies. He had not seen the poor girl's face, but her head was bent down, and no doubt she was weeping, bitterly weeping, whilst this sanctimonious sneak was taking advantage of her distress to say how he loved her!

Savagely did Giles bite his lips. "And then," he reflected, "the fellow will spread the tale all round the village; if I am caught here, I am as good as booked for Norwich gaol."

Giles, accordingly, having sworn his mother to secrecy, set off with his bag of money. The yellow bag was now rather heavy, but the fear of the judge with the black cap acted as a spur. His poor mother, bewildered and dishonoured, in her own eyes to-night, in the eyes of her neighbours to-morrow, sat down and cried—first as a little child

cries who is frightened at being left alone, presently as a mother cries whose darling boy has been taken from her.

Meanwhile, Angus Forbes had gone back to the hotel, and told them how he had warned John Fletcher to keep an eye upon Minnie. So far all was right. But the Vicar must be told now about the escape of Giles, and consulted about the next step.

Accordingly it was agreed that Forbes and his sister should call at the Vicarage on their way home.

The Vicar's children and servants had gone to bed when Angus rang the bell; the Vicar was sitting in his library smoking, and he himself opened the door to Angus.

"Come in, come in, Miss Forbes, if you don't mind the smell of tobacco. Some news brings you here, doesn't it?"

"You have heard that Giles has not gone by train—has run off somewhere?" said Angus.

"No; my boy returned with the pony-cart, but he has not told me anything—the little stupid."

"Well, he made off with the bag of money, which was his, I suppose, bag and all; for he managed to exchange bags with William. The question is, what is he going to do?"

"Dear me; how very tiresome!" said the Vicar, knocking the ashes out of his pipe. "Will he return to marry Minnie, or will he try to carry her off?"

"We have seen to that, sir. I have warned John Fletcher."

"As Giles has declined to accept our offer, I see no help for it; the wedding must take place."

"Or Giles must be arrested," said Jean.

"What a terrible alternative," replied the Vicar; "either of them is appalling. Still, I see no help for it, unless we can get Giles's mother to stay

Minnie from coming to church. I don't see how I can prevent it."

"Some one must tell his mother," said Jean, "but it would not do for either Angus or me to act in it."

"Certainly not; I will go now and call on Mrs. Fletcher, and break the news to the poor things as softly as I can."

"Thank you, sir; that will do, I hope," said Angus.

Then the brother and sister walked silently to their lodge. When they reached the gate, Jean said—

"I have no patience with that Minnie; she ought to know better than we do what sort of fellow Giles is. If she suffers, I don't much pity her."

"Don't be hard, Jean," replied Angus; "everybody keeps the truth from her, poor girl. I doubt there will be a terrible scene to-morrow — and Sunday, too!"

But it was fated that Minnie should hear nothing that night; for, just as the Vicar was setting off to see her, he was called away to the sick-bed of a dying parishioner some miles inland.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE WEDDING-DAY.

IT was a beautiful May morning that dawned on Minnie Fletcher, this Sunday of her wedding; the sun shone into her little bedroom window and awoke her right early. She rose and knelt by her bed to pray. And she prayed for Giles more than for herself: she prayed that God would turn his heart, and make him a sober and good husband. Then she prayed for herself, that she might have strength to resist the evil in her husband's character, that she might prove a good and faithful wife, and be blessed with happiness in this life and in the next. She had half risen, but bent her knee once more, and prayed that Angus Forbes might win a worthy woman and forget his disappointment in a new love. Then, when her eyes were swimming with generous tears at the thought of poor Angus, who loved her so faithfully, being left desolate and forsaken, she sat down on her bed and began to comb her hair, thinking now more of Angus than of Giles.

"Why had people plagued her so, advising her not to take Giles? If they had only let her alone, she might have chosen the other. Was it, then, out of self-will that she had decided to marry young Fletcher? And was the bettering of Giles more an excuse for her choice than a true motive?" She felt a twinge of conscience, and tugged sharply at the comb as it flew through her raven tresses.

So Minnie's thoughts on this, her wedding-day, were not as sunny as the skies.

At seven o'clock in the morning a little girl tapped at the back door of Giles's house. She tapped once, and nobody came. She tapped a second time, still no one came. She then went to the neighbour's house, and said to the woman who was washing up some cups and saucers—

"Will you be so good, Mrs. Somers, as to give this letter to Mrs. Fletcher, when she comes in? It's from the Vicar."

"All right, lassie. She'll be at Minnie Fletcher's now, I'll upho'de it, trying on the new dress."

"Thank you, mum," said the little girl, and ran off, singing and tripping with dancing steps; for the promise of a marriage makes every girl's heart glad, howsoever young she be.

Mrs. Somers waited awhile before she went in next door, but when it drew near half-past seven, she said to herself—

"This here wedding is at eight o'clock, and Mrs. Fletcher must be back by now, if she means going to church; for it will take her fifteen minutes, even in the donkey-cart."

But when she saw the front of the house, and that the shutters had not been taken down, she cried out—

"Mercy on us! There's summut wrong here."

She knocked and kicked, peeped through the

keyhole, and listened, but no sight or sound reassured her.

"Harry," she cried to her husband—a tall, burly fisherman,—"what's come to the Fletchers? Here's Giles Fletcher's wedding-day, and nobody up yet, though all the folks is trapesing up to church to see the doings."

Harry lounged round with his pipe in his mouth, and rattled the back door merrily, and shouted for Giles. But all within was still and voiceless, and the lurcher in the stable whined and scratched at the door.

"I say, missus, this 'ere looks very like queer street," said the fisherman, scratching his head.

"Shall I run to John Fletcher's," asked his wife, "and see if she be not there all the time?"

"Yes, I would, missus; belike Giles and his mother be i' t'other house."

Presently Mrs. Somers returned, saying, "There was nobody yonder neither; the neighbours said they had started off for Beckthorp church a few minutes sin'."

"I think I can get in by this back window," said Somers; and, with a little persuasion, he induced the fastening to give way. It was not long before his head appeared from the bedroom window. He stooped down, and whispered—

"She's lying on her bed, bad—can't speak; her mouth is slewed round right across her cheek, Mary. I'll go down and let you in through the door."

Then Mrs. Somers went in, and ministered to the stricken mother as best she could.

The Vicar's letter lay on the little table unopened. Poor Mrs. Fletcher could take no notice of anything; she breathed thickly, and her eyes were half open,

"Dear, dear! and on her son's wedding-day, too!"

Then Mrs. Somers began to cry, out of sympathy.

"Shall I fetch the doctor? Where's Giles, I wonder?"

"Yes, Harry, run and fetch the doctor. Deary me! And to think she should be taken like this on her son's wedding-day! Well, I wonder if Giles knows what's come to her. Belike he never thought of calling her this morning. Heigh! but the doors was all locked up. Then how did Giles get out this morning? It looks very like—well, I'm clean 'mazed about it. Giles never slept at home, or I'm a goose."

While Mrs. Somers was making her sad discovery, and reflecting on the vicissitudes of life, the preparations for the wedding had gone on merrily up at Beckthorp.

The churchyard was full of little girls and grown women; the church, too, contained a good sprinkling of friends of the two families, whose heads seemed all put on hind afore, as they were looking back over their shoulders to see the bride enter at the west door.

Aunt Bessie was not there. "Ah, she be quality now: she comes in late, you'll see," said one.

"Oh! but Mr. Brown is at the lych-gate, talking to the constable—a-waiting for her to drive up with the bride. You'll see if he bean't, Mary Ann."

"And the Vicar yonder—why don't he put his surplice on? and why do he look so grave?"

"Why, they do say that he would have liked Minnie to marry Angus Forbes. That's his brother Willie, yonder by the porch—him as has the big dog in a strap."

The Vicar shook hands with Mr. Brown, and, taking him aside, said—

"I have heard nothing in reply to my letter to Mrs. Fletcher; so I suppose the bride is coming. Have you instructed the constable in his part?"

"Yes, he knows what to do: when the bridegroom comes, he will collar him, and march him off to the station."

"What a terrible position! How I wish I could have prevented this sooner!"

"It's not our fault; we acted as soon as we had the evidence. It is really my wife's fault for not making the facts known before. But we can't blame her."

"Certainly not, Mr. Brown; she knew of some very suspicious facts; she could hardly act upon them."

A hum of voices, a running of little feet along the gravelled path, betokened the arrival of one of the chief performers. It was the bride, leaning on the arm of John Fletcher, and smiling sweetly from side to side, as friends wished her joy on this happy day.

There were some large beech trees near the lych-gate, and, as Minnie passed under their shade, the birds sang that morning, and twittered joyously in the branches, as if to add their welcome to that of her human friends. That scene dwelt long in her memory.

Minnie shook hands with Willie at the porch, and patted the mastiff on the head, who, however, took no heed of the compliment, but held his muzzle to the ground, and looked up moodily, with blood-shot eyes.

John and Minnie walked up the nave, John with a sprig of lavender in his mouth, trying to look un-

concerned, Minnie smiling graciously, and showing her pretty dimpled cheek and white teeth.

When she found that Giles had not yet come, she gave a little forced laugh, and sat down in one of the pews. Once more all heads turned to the western door to greet the bridegroom. The Vicar was standing within the porch: he had not yet robed for the service, but was talking softly to Mr. Brown. There were many young fisher-lads sitting in the church. They had come to see their chum "turned off," and were already whispering amongst themselves at the delay of the bridegroom.

Ten minutes, fifteen minutes passed, and yet no sign of Giles or his mother. Minnie's mouth began to pout, and she tossed her head with all the haughtiness of a slighted beauty. She could hear the children in the road making fun of Giles's unpunctuality.

Twenty minutes passed. The good folk in the church were beginning to move fretfully in their seats: they no longer looked back at the porch; their eyes were all bent now on poor Minnie, who was turning pale and red by turns, and had a tear glistening in her eye; while John Fletcher was now gnawing nervously at the stalk of his lavender, and making the flower shake and sway under his left eye.

"Here he comes!" the children outside cried, as a pony-carriage drove up; and immediately every face but Minnie's turned round.

The folk in church heard a murmuring outside; then one of the Miss Frasers walked up the church, and, leaning over Minnie's shoulder, whispered a few words to her.

Minnie got up, looking scared, and followed Miss Fraser into the vestry.

The people in church began to ask one another

questions; then the Vicar walked up to the first step leading into the chancel, and there turned and faced the congregation.

"My good people," he said, "you will be sorry to hear that Mrs. Fletcher, the mother of the bridegroom, has been taken ill, and that there can be no wedding to-day."

After one gasp of astonishment, there arose a vast clatter of boots, and in a little space the church was empty.

Outside they found Harry Somers giving to the crowd a graphic narrative of how he had forced the window and found Mrs. Fletcher lying across her bed in a fit.

But soon the question arose, "Where is Giles?"

Harry Bent being appealed to, shook his head, saying—

"No, neighbours, I don't know nothing of his doings; he has given me up as a bad un, and very like he's gone to make a parson of hisself."

Bent made a white tie with deft motion of his hands, and the sarcasm set all the boys laughing.

Meanwhile, Miss Fraser had led Minnie from the vestry into the Vicarage garden, and so into her father's library.

The Vicar had some trouble in prevailing upon the people to go home quietly; they were disappointed of a sight which some of them had come a long way to see.

The village constable was oracular; he said nothing, but the way in which he shook his head and pinched his lips together showed plainly enough that he contained within him perilous matter which he found it hard to keep concealed.

"You knows where Giles is," said one big boy to him.

The constable smiled, and looked another way.

"Have you took him up for poaching, then?"

"Get along with you, you boys! Can't you see I'm on duty?'

"Yes, we can see that by your 'at, sir."

"Here! clear out and make room for your betters. Any need to stay on this beat, Mr. Fraser, sir?"

"No, Atkins; you can go to your breakfast now; but I want you to take these telegrams for me first. Giles Fletcher is wanted for murder; quick! lose no time."

Thus was the churchyard left to its dead; and the cottagers who lived a mile or more away wondered why no marriage bells rang out this sunny morning. But the Vicar hurried to meet Minnie and John Fletcher in his library.

CHAPTER XXX.

MINNIE'S RESOLVE.

WHEN the Vicar entered his library he found John Fletcher looking out of the window, and Minnie sitting with her head in her hand, silently weeping.

"Why had not Giles told her he could not come? Why had he put this affront upon her, making her the laughing-stock of the village? Next time *she* would be late, and he should have to wait and look silly before them all." Such were some of her thoughts when Mr. Fraser entered the room.

"John, pray sit down. I have something very painful to say to you both. Minnie, my dear girl, steel your heart to bear a severe blow, and meet this trouble with your good common sense and trust in Providence."

"Yes, sir," said John, "that's my prayer always in sorrow—just 'Thy will be done,' and nothing more. As for Minnie, she is a brave lass, and a good lass; and if she do sob a bit now, why, it's a disappointment for a young woman to get all her clothes ready, and come to church, as you may say, for nothing!"

"It is indeed, John. But the cause is much worse than the consequence; it is that which pains me."

"Ah, well, sir, she may recover of that stroke. I've known——"

The Vicar waved his hand, saying, "My dear friend, you don't know the cause of Giles's absence this morning. He left Beckthorp yesterday, and probably told his poor mother before he went that a terrible charge hung over him, which made it necessary for him to go at once. The poor mother doubtless spent a night of poignant grief, and this morning, early, she was seized with paralysis, as I gather. Giles had gone long before his mother fell ill."

Minnie's sobs had been stayed. A "terrible charge" — the words sent a shiver through her. When she could find words, she asked in a low voice—

"This charge, sir, do you believe it?"

The Vicar took a seat beside her, and, holding her hand, replied—

"Minnie, I will tell you all. Mr. Brown has heard the evidence, and he finds it very grave; your Aunt Bessie has heard it, and can't defend him; Giles himself has heard it, and, rather than meet the charge, he has run away without so much as giving you a hint of what he was doing."

Minnie's eyes began to flash indignantly. In a firmer voice, she asked—

"Please, Mr. Fraser, what was the charge?"

"The charge against Giles was of the gravest. I hardly like to name it to you to-day."

"I can bear it now," said Minnie, putting her hand to her side.

"My dear child, there was ground for suspecting that he had committed a murder."

"Oh!" Minnie withdrew her hand sharply, and John drew nearly the whole sprig of lavender into his mouth.

"He was offered an opportunity of explaining the suspicious facts; but he has gone."

Minnie's head had sunk on her bosom, which was heaving with a conflict of emotions. First she sobbed for many minutes; then, as the two men remained silent, she lifted her head proudly, and said—

"Had I no friends who were willing to save me from this disgrace? Oh, why did not some one warn me of his character? I thought him easily tempted; I never suspected him of any wickedness. Some one should have warned me. It was cruel to let me come here."

Again she wept and sobbed, and the two men looked on helplessly, and said nothing.

When the poor girl grew a little calmer, the Vicar began—

"We could not warn you earlier, Minnie, because we did not know ourselves twenty-four hours ago. I wrote last night to Giles's mother, asking her to go to you and break the terrible news. That letter the poor woman either never received, or else was too ill to act upon. That letter might have spared you the pain of this morning's ordeal."

"Thank you, sir; you have always been—been very kind."

Minnie again broke down, and John took the opportunity of going to the bow window, and asking quietly—

"You'll excuse me, sir, but who be the — the man he did away with?"

"Mr. Forbes, the head keeper, was the man."

"Nay, never!"

"The murder was committed, if it was a murder,

with Giles's gun ; there were other suspicious facts which Giles could not explain."

"Dear me! Dear me!" groaned the fisherman.

"And now, Minnie," said the Vicar, "it is quite impossible for you to go home yet. You shall go to my daughter's work-room upstairs, and we will send you some hot coffee. Yes, I insist upon it, my dear child. You have no father or mother, and I am your spiritual father in this parish. You are my child, and must obey me."

"Yes, Minnie," said John ; "it's the best thing to take something warm when you've had a knock-down blow. It's very kind of the Vicar, to be sure! and, maybe, we're taking up too much of his time on Sunday morning, Minnie."

"Indeed, I am very thankful," sobbed Minnie. "I only want a quiet place where I may hide my face a while."

"Dora!" shouted the Vicar, "take Minnie up to your room, and make her as comfortable as you can."

Dora, a bright-eyed, rosy-cheeked girl, came and took Minnie by the hand, as if she were leading a little child.

"Poor thing!" said the Vicar to John Fletcher, "she must stay here a day or two, if you will let her, till she has learnt to bear the shame and the sorrow."

"Thank you, sir, very heartily. She be a good wench ; she will come round to the wind in time, sir. Thank you kindly, sir. I will go fetch her some things."

So Minnie ate her wedding-breakfast all by herself, amid sobs and sighs and prayers and bitter tears.

In the evening, when the day's work was over,

the Vicar found Minnie pacing up and down the room.

"Oh! I am so glad you have come at last, sir; for I have made up my mind to go back and nurse Mrs. Fletcher."

"Can you do it, my dear?"

"I think so," Minnie replied, looking up into his face with a smile. "I have sat here and cried nearly all day, till my eyes are quite red; that is enough to give to self, isn't it? Now I have been praying while you were at church. I could hear all the hymns quite plain by this open window, and they sounded like heaven. So, now it comes to me that my duty is to look after Giles's mother."

The Vicar looked softly upon her, and said—

"You have chosen wisely, Minnie. I will walk down with you to Nether Beckthorp; and perhaps you will call on Aunt Bessie, and tell her you are not angry with her for stopping your marriage."

"I will call and see her; but—but I think she might have told me about Giles, if she knew these dreadful things."

"I fancy she did try to dissuade you, until you almost quarrelled with her, Minnie. You were rather headstrong, I fear."

"I have had a lesson—a bitter lesson," said the girl, tremulously.

"And Mrs. Brown has had such a revolution in thought and conduct just lately, that we must make some allowance. Neither is her mind quite free from the old malady, as her husband tells me; though it assumes another form. For she insists on believing that they are going to be ruined."

"I'm sorry for that; because what Aunt Bessie believes, in her madness, turns out to be true."

"Ah, that is an Oriental notion—that the mad

are inspired; but it stands on very doubtful evidence."

So Minnie astonished all the neighbours by going to nurse Mrs. Fletcher. Her patient recovered sufficiently to move about feebly, and Minnie still stayed to help, at her earnest request.

"Perhaps my poor boy may come back," the poor widow would say, as she set a light in her bedroom window.

Then would Minnie's eye flash with a strange light, and she repressed the words that struggled to leap forth.

Mr. and Mrs. Brown had made all preparations for their departure, which was to take place on the morrow. Minnie had put Mrs. Fletcher to bed, and was sitting in the keeping-room, listening vaguely to the hissing of the kettle and the roaring of the sea.

"May we come in?"

It was Jean Forbes, followed by her brother. They had walked down to say "Good-bye" to her.

Jean talked much of the land to which they were going, and tried to make Minnie promise that some day she would come across the water and live with Aunt Bessie.

Angus sat still and gazed upon Minnie till she blushed.

When Jean had taken leave, Angus lingered a moment to say—

"Good-bye, Minnie; and if you get a good husband, as I doubt not you will, I wish you happiness."

"I shall never—never marry now," said the girl, rather sadly.

"Oh yes, you will," said Angus, blundering in his confused way; "I hope you will, Minnie, I'm sure."

"Do *you* want me to marry?" she asked, lifting her dark eyes and piercing him to the very soul.

"I'll tell you what," he stammered out, "if you'll let me know when your ship is coming, I'll drive over to meet it; if it is across Australia, I will. You're a good girl, Minnie, to stay here and help Mrs. Fletcher. I wanted to say that, because we may never meet again, you know."

She held out her hand for the last time. He pressed it, murmured "God bless you!" and hastened after his sister.

"Well," said Jean, "is Minnie coming with us, after all?"

"I wouldn't dream of asking her, Jean. It is her duty to stay here, and she sees it. I would be the last person to take advantage of her distress, and ask her to marry me."

"She's so pretty," said Jean, coolly, "that she's sure to get married; if you'd left it to me, I would have managed better."

"It's very well, Jean, as it is. I don't want her heart while it is full of pity for Giles. We're better separated, Jean. Perhaps I may pick up some nice girl out yonder."

Angus did not tell his sister of the offer he had just made to drive Minnie from the boat; why should he?

And so the Browns went to Australia, taking with them Angus and Jean Forbes, and two stalwart labourers who were bent on improving themselves; and life at Beckthorp went on much as usual. Minnie recovered her spirits, but would not encourage the boys in their attentions to her.

The neighbours said she was waiting for Giles to return.

In the autumn Mrs. Fletcher died, and Minnie

wrote to Aunt Bessie from John's house, saying that she would like to join her in Australia, if Mr. Forbes would be kind enough to drive over and meet the boat.

Aunt Bessie was lying under the verandah when this letter came, and she pushed it across to Angus, saying—

"What an absurd girl she is! She speaks of driving two hundred miles as if it was a morning's jaunt! Drive over and meet her! Ah, you may well laugh, Angus."

Angus was beaming all over with happy smiles.

"I believe Angus means to go," said Mr. Brown, puffing away at a long pipe after a hard day's work.

"I do," said Angus.

"Good gracious! the man's mad!" cried Aunt Bessie. Then after a moment's pause, she added, "I see, of course, you mean to marry her before you return here."

"I do," said Angus.

"Well, I think it was rather bold of her to suggest such a thing," said Aunt Bessie.

"She didn't suggest it. I did."

"You did? Then you've been writing to her?"

Angus chuckled to himself, and just then the young man from the next station called to see Jean "on business."

"Well! I never did! I really never did!" cried Aunt Bessie.

"Oh yes, you did once, Bess," said her husband; "it's the way of the world, and—a better way than this—look!" He showed her a letter he had just received from England. "Giles Fletcher has escaped hanging. He was washed overboard off Boston deeps, and his body has not yet been found."

"Poor young man!" cried Aunt Bessie. "Ah! don't you remember, Angus? You might have had him hanged by the neck by just saying a dozen words; but you said, 'No, Giles, I leave you to the Great Judge of all the earth.'"

The rest were silent for a space. It seemed to them a more awful end than the gallows inside the gaol at Norwich would have been, and the clamorous crowd without.

Aunt Bessie wiped a tear away as she said, "I can't help crying—once that lad was the loveliest and sweetest of darlings—God shield us all!"

"Amen!" was the deep-toned reply of Angus Forbes.

THE END.

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